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—Eugene Feuchting

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STARTLING stories

Vol. 28, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION January, 1953

Featured Novel

DOUBLE MEANING ..... **Damon Knight** 10

All his values were useless, his defenses meaningless—he had lost everything but a self he didn't even know existed

A Full-Length Novelet

OVERDRIVE ..... **Murray Leinster** 100

He was one man against mutiny—with only the secret of his skill to help him match the formidable weapons of the aliens

Short Stories

THE BOY WITH FIVE FINGERS ..... **James E. Gunn** 58

Everybody's different—but some, more different than others

MY OLD VENUSIAN HOME ..... **Kendell Foster Crossen** 61

The second planet offered some real old Southern hospitality

NO CHARGE TO THE MEMBERSHIP ..... **Roger Dee** 69

Would you believe a dream—if it should happen to come true?

BUTTON, BUTTON ..... **Isaac Asimov** 74

Even the old professor wasn't really able to foresee the past

WHO'S CRIBBING? ..... **Jack Lewis** 83

A glimpse into the editorial correspondence of an stf writer

THREE-LEGGED JOE ..... **Jack Vance** 87

He proved to be a triple threat to the fortune awaiting them

Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES ..... **The Editor** 6

VIDEO-TECHNICS ..... **Pat Jones** 73

CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS ..... **Jerome Bixby** 140

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF ..... **Reviews of New Books** 143

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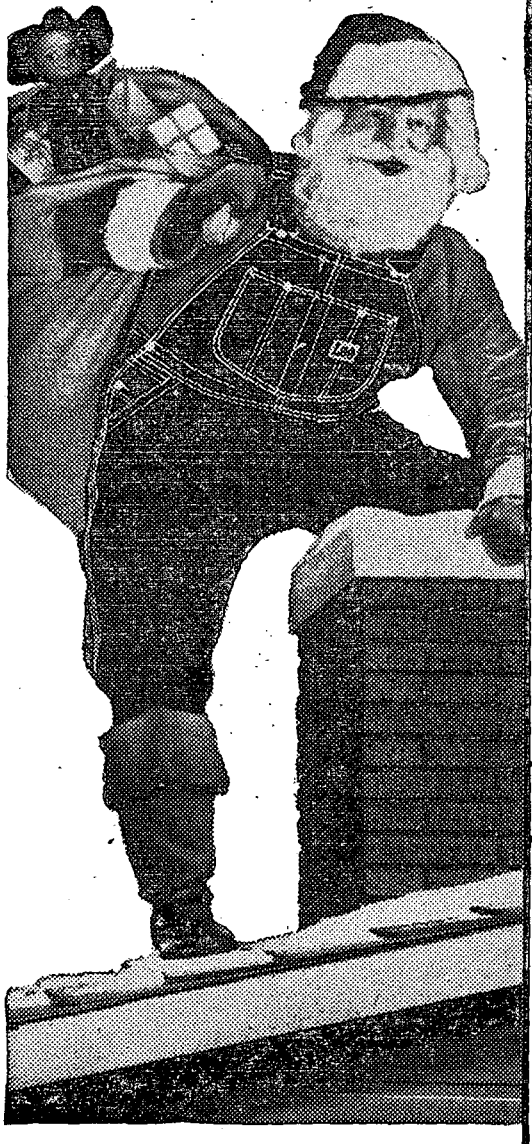
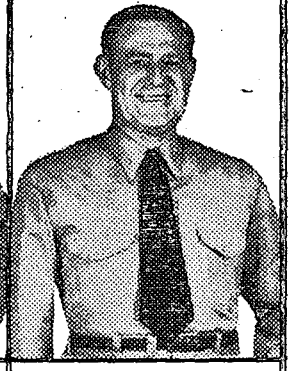
There's a LEE for EVERY job...

and for every member of the family



Lee Overalls, *made of tough Jelt Denim, give far longer wear.*



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A Science Fiction Department Featuring Letters from Readers

NOTES ON A CONVENTION

TWO months have cooled its memories, but the letters still criss-cross, the thousands of pictures which hatched from the heat of expiring flashbulbs are being exchanged, the fanzines burble with impressions and reports. So here, for your memory book, are a few more scrambled impressions of the Tenth World Science Fiction Convention:

THAT FIRST DAY: the starkly glaring Morrison lobby, the long lines at the registration desk, the growing clumps of fans renewing year-old acquaintances. . . Mines and wife with a broken-down gladstone between them. . . "Whaddaya mean our reservations aren't ready!"

Jerry Bixby, scotch and soda in hand, charging madly across the lobby on some grim and mysterious errand. . . .

Willy Ley, in arm-waving conversation with L. Sprague de Camp. . . .

Ted Sturgeon with a beard, looking like a cherubic Mephisto. . . .

"This guy House . . . broke with Hubbard . . . says he's solved problems of gravity, ESP, teleportation, broadcast of power . . . sure, all those recent earthquakes were caused by *clears!*"

"Can I have your autograph?"

"So that's Bea Mahaffey! *Slur-r-r-r-p!*"

"Whaddaya mean, Will Jenkins didn't show up? He's supposed to be *toastmaster* at the goddam banquet! Hey, Bloch, can you make like a toastmaster?"

"Ladies and gents: I have here in my hand a small doll. This represents Will Jenkins. Kindly note that it is pierced through-and-through with long rusty pins. You know the rest. . ." (fiendish chuckle.)

Bixby and George O. Smith charging wildly through the lobby, glasses in hand. . . .

"Can I have your autograph?"

"You mean they wrecked the penthouse?" "An absolute shambles! The house dick came up—" "Garn—only one lousy chair got busted!" "Says *you!* How about that overgrown spittoon full of sand somebody dumped all over the floor? Nearly buried four of the Little Men. . ."

". . . and it is my belief that the Saucers are a form of intelligent beings residing in the ionosphere. . ."

". . . the Little Men are so sore they're considering expelling fandom and starting a school for murder. . ."

"I'll open. . ." "Raise you." "Raise you right back." "Let's see what you got." "Four nines." "Well, I got five aces. . . ."

Bixby and Marty Greenberg dashing through the lobby, Bixby with glass in hand. . . .

"Listen, there's a party in room 1927 and they got some of the damnedest southern lightning. . ."

"I'm Bob Farnham and this Brownie takes pictures. So just back up against that pillar. . . ."

Swish! Bixby just went by again.

"One slice of ham. A scoop of mashed pota-

[*Turn to page 8*]

DENIQUE

WITH the February 1953 issue STARTLING STORIES blossoms out in a new format with neatly trimmed edges. So comes another milestone. The magazine, to judge by reader reaction, has constantly climbed in quality, both of content and outward appearance. You've asked for trimmed edges—here it is.

Please—no flowers. Just send your stunned and grateful comments the usual way, via Uncle Sam's mail to THE ETHER VIBRATES.

—The Editor

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I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY JOBS IN RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man

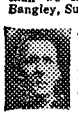
America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You

2 FREE BOOKS SHOW HOW MAIL COUPON

I TRAINED THESE MEN

LOST JOB, NOW HAS OWN SHOP
"Got laid off my machine shop job which I believe was best thing ever happened as I opened a full time Radio Shop. Business is picking up every week."—E. T. Slate, Corsicana, Texas.

GOOD JOB WITH STATION
"I am Broadcast Engineer at WLPM. Another technician and I have opened a Radio-TV service shop in our spare time. Big TV sales here . . . more work than we can handle."—J. H. Bangley, Suffolk, Va.



$10 TO $15 WEEK SPARE TIME
"Four months after enrolling for NRI course, was able to service Radios . . . averaged $10 to $15 a week spare time. Now have full time Radio and Television business."—William Weyde, Brooklyn, New York.

SWITCHED TO TV SERVICING
"I recenty switched over from studio work and am now holding a position as service technician. I am still with RCA, enjoying my work more and more every day."—N. Ward, Ridgefield, N. J.

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

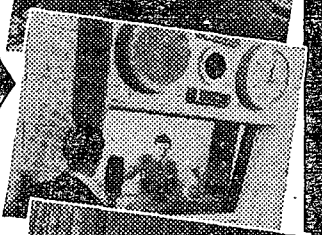
Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build with kits I send helps you make extra money servicing sets, gives practical experience on circuits common to Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep.

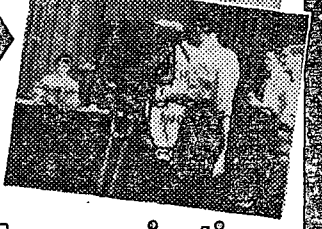
2. GOOD PAY JOB

NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.

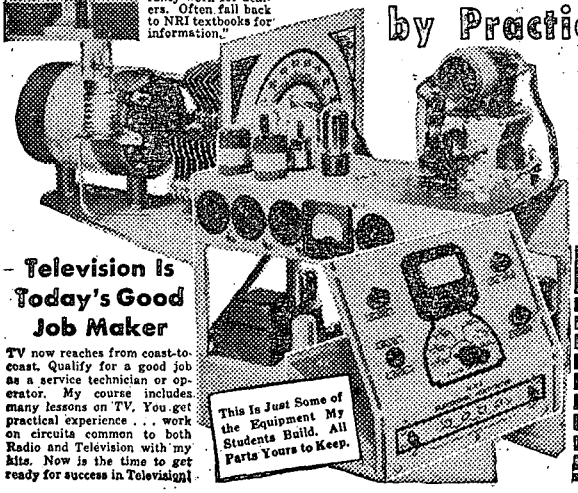


3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized . . many of them expected to be in operation in 1953. This *means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures.* More operators, installation service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in TV! Find out what Radio and TV offer you.



You Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing With Kits I Send



Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left, are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

Television Is Today's Good Job Maker

TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. Qualify for a good job as a service technician or operator. My course includes many lessons on TV. You get practical experience . . . work on circuits common to both Radio and Television with my kits. Now is the time to get ready for success in Television!

Mail Coupon—find out what RADIO-TELEVISION Can Do for You

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual Servicing Lesson; shows how you learn at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, Pres., Dept. 3AQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 39th Year.

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toes. A handful of discouraged peas. Three shrimp buried in ketchup. Coffee and ice cream. *Four dollars and twenty-five cents???*"

"Can I have your autograph?"

Burr Tillstrom of Kukla, Fran & Ollie, taking a modest bow. Ben Mahaffey sporting a Pogo button. Garry Davis, World Citizen number One, retired, a surprise comic hit in a screaming skit entitled "How To Split An Atom." Method: pick up atom carefully between thumb and forefinger, place on table, raise meat cleaver overhead, take careful aim at center of atom . . . now lean on it, making sure cutting edge of cleaver comes down directly on atom's gut . . . *boin-n-ng!*

How to give away free copies of REVOLT OF THE TRIFFIDS, compliments of STARTLING STORIES: Get a table, stack it up with books; snare Bixby as he whizzes by and browbeat him into lettering a big sign—"Come and get 'em!"—then jump back out of the wild rush. . .

In the elevator, Mines to Bixby: "You know . . . we went off and left that table of TRIFFIDS unguarded. Maybe one of us should stay—" Bixby to Mines: "Sam, baby . . . you afraid somebody'll *steal* them?"

"Can I have your autograph?"

The masquerade ball: the inevitable monster bearing the inevitable screaming blonde; the vampire with ketchup blood all down his front; a girl with three br—huh? L. Sprague de Camp with tendrils; Ginny Saari in a transparent space suit like a Bergey cover (won first prize too!); Harlan Ellison with his bare chest sticking out . . . and a bead of perspiration on it, almost obscuring it; a guy togged out with sword and boots and cloak like a Poul Anderson space opera; a space-siren in black tights with enough curves for a couple of dozen solar orbits; two colors of punch—pink for the unweaned fans; white and spiked for the big kids—compliments of the Elves, Gnomes, etc. etc. etc. Chowder and Marching Society.

Les and Es Cole . . . two nice kids, making a terrific pitch for SanFran for the next convention. Tough; would have liked to see California ourselves . . . but we'll bet Philly does it up in pink ribbons. Maybe SanFran in '54. . . .

Ley vs. Palmer: "I don't believe these flying saucers exist . . ." "Of course they do. . ." "They don't. . ." "They do. . ." "They *don't*. . ." "They *do*. . . ."

Bloch: "Hey, Willy, want to see a flying saucer?" Tosses a teacup saucer from the table at him. "See it?"

Ley: "Ja—but only from below!"

Bixby and Howard Browne charging through the lobby, Bixby waving aloft the remains of a gin and tonic.

"Look, Indianapolis *can't* get the convention, so if you swing your vote to Baltimore. . ." "New York? Who's in *New York*?" "They take in the sidewalks at nine o'clock in. . ." "San Francisco promises. . ." "*Philadelphia got it?* Who lives in *Philadelphia?*"

"Hello, room clerk? Listen, I'm in 1814 and I haven't slept a wink the whole goddam night. What's with this science fiction schmaffis anyhow? Creeps with green hair and Boris Karloff faces crawling around in the corridors. Werewolves scaring hell outa my wife! It's four o'clock in the morning. Ain't they got any homes? Let's have a little peace, for God's sake. Sounds like a family of baboons filled up on spider-juice!"

Jerome D. Bixby wishes to apologize formally for refusing to come to the aid of the two fans who got mixed up with the house detective: "Fellows, I'm sorry. But you remember the circumstances, don't you? My hands were tied!"

Phil Farmer, standing up to be introduced and getting a wall-shaking ovation—all on one published story in SS. Phil's too modest to admit how pleased he was, but we saw his toes curl inside his shoes.

Swish! Bixby again.

George O. Smith with a camera swinging around his neck. Did he ever take any pictures? Sure . . . of girls.

And the omnipresent fan who managed to be everywhere at once. If you took out a cigarette, his lighter burst into flame under your very nose. If you turned around, his hand, proffering a cigarette, clipped you in the whiskers. If you licked your lips, a glass clattered against your teeth. He mixed 'em strong, too.

Susan Mines, backed into a corner by fans: "*My* opinion on science fiction? But. . ." "Well, gee, you're Sam's wife, aren't you? Can I have your autograph?"

"Mr. Heinlein?" "No, I'm Sam Mines." "Who?" "Sam Mines." "Oh."

Mel Korshak, an exceedingly poised and articulate master of ceremonies. JWC, Jr., at home on the stage, terrific personality, wonderful speaker.

Ted Dikty announcing his engagement to Judy May, watching her zip around like Bixby: "I didn't know the *half* of it."

Rough trip back, bumpy air over Ohio; nobody heaved, but the wife refused to look out the window, instead watching Peter Donald, ra-

(Continued on page 128)

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that *thought generates a mental* energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby *these things can be intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret *long cherished by the Rosicrucians*—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women *to soar to new heights* of accomplishment. *They will show* you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

Scribe M.E.X. The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

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Address.....State.....

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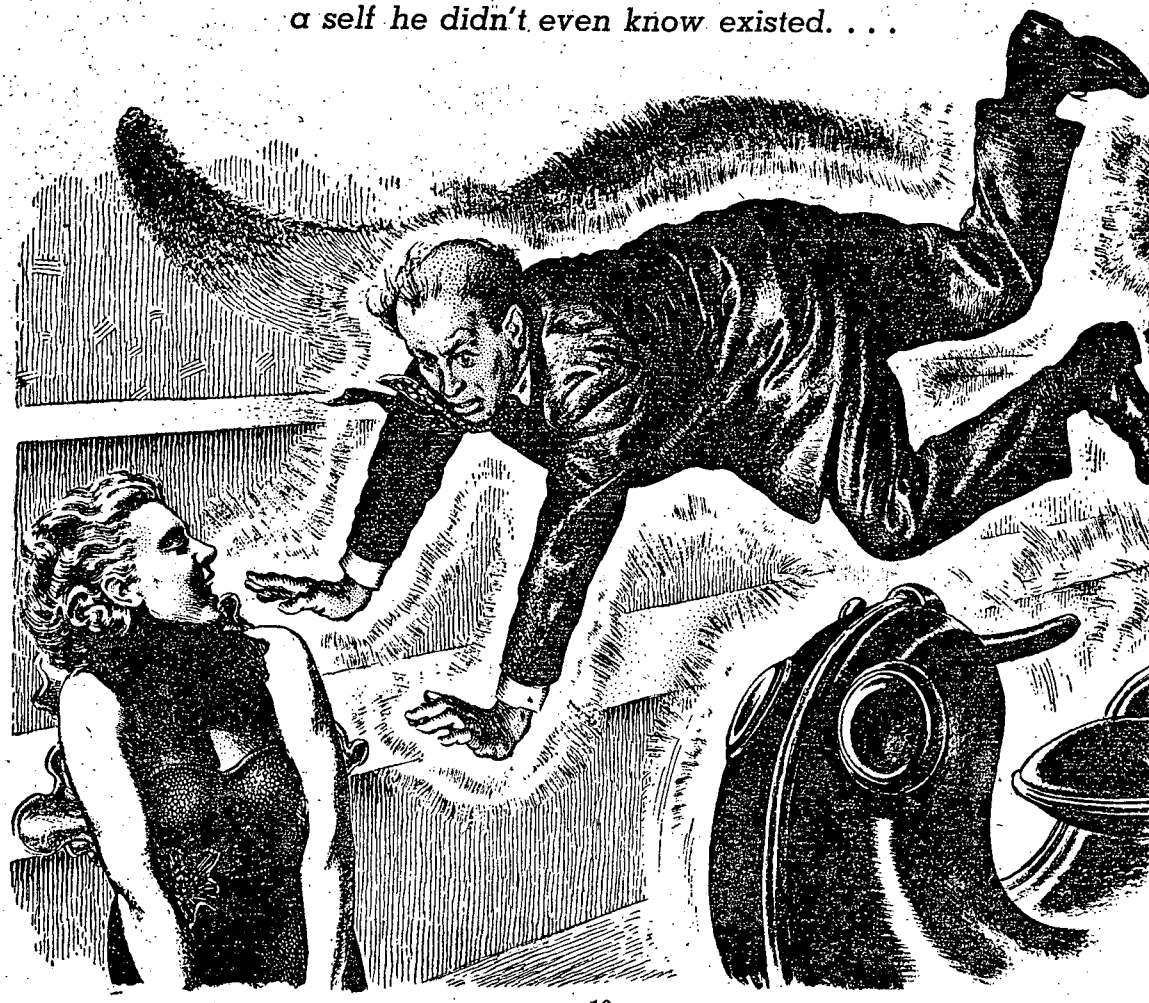
A Novel by DAMON KNIGHT

DOUBLE MEANING

All his values were meaningless, his defenses useless . . . he had lost everything except a self he didn't even know existed. . . .



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He charged forward, lost balance and fell

I

SOMEWHERE in the city, a monster was hiding. . . .

Lying back against the limousine's cushions, Thorne Spangler let his mind dwell on that thought, absorbing it with the deliberate enjoyment of a small boy sucking a piece of candy. He visualized the monster, walking down a lighted street, or sitting in a cheap hired room; tentacles coiled, waiting, under the shell that made it look like a man—or a woman. And all around it, the life of the city going on: *Hello, Jeff. Have you heard? They're stopping all the cars. Some sort of spy case . . . My sister tried to fly out to Tucson, and they*

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turned her back . . . My cousin at the space-port says nothing is coming in or leaving except military ships. It must be something big. . . .

And the monster, listening, feeling the net tighten around it.

The tension was growing, Spangler thought; it hung in the air, in the abnormally empty streets. You could hear it: a stillness that welled up under the beehive hum—a waiting stillness, that made you want to stop and hold your breath.

Spangler glanced at Pembun, sitting quietly beside him. Does he feel it? he wondered. It was hard to tell. You never knew what, if anything, a colonial was thinking. Probably, Spangler decided, he's most heartily wishing himself back on his own sleepy little planet, far from all this commotion at the hub of the Universe.

For Spangler himself, this moment was the climax of a lifetime. The monster—the Rithian—was only the catalyst, the stone flung into the pool. The salient fact was that just now, for as long as the operation lasted, all the interminable workings of the Earth Empire revolved around one tiny sphere: Earth Security Department, North American District, Southwestern Sector. For this brief time, one man—Spangler—was more important than all the others who administered the Empire.

It was not bad; not at all bad—for a man whose father had been a common draughtsman.

The car decelerated smoothly and stopped. Two tall men in the pearl-grey knee-breeches of the city patrol barred the way, both with automatic weapons at the ready. Behind them, the squat bulk of a Gun Unit covered half the roadway.

Two more patrolmen came forward and flung open all four doors of the car, stepping back smartly into crossfire positions. "All out," said the one with the sergeant's cape. "Security check. Move!"

As Spangler passed him, the sergeant touched his chest respectfully. "Good afternoon, Commissioner."

"Sergeant," said Spangler, in tranquil acknowledgment, smiling but not troubling himself to look at the man directly; and he led Pembun to the end of the queue.

AS THE line moved on, Spangler turned and found Pembun craning his short neck curiously. "It's a stereoptic fluoroscope," Spangler explained with languid amusement. "That's one test the Rithian can't meet, no matter how good his human disguise may be. One of these check stations is set up at each corner of every twentieth avenue and every tenth cross-street. If the Rithian is fool enough to pass one, we have him. If he doesn't, the house checks will force him out. He doesn't have a chance."

Spangler stepped between the screen and the bulbous twin projectors, and saw the glowing, three-dimensional image of his skeleton appear in the hooded screen. The square blotch at the left wrist and the smaller one near it were his communication and thumb-watch. The other, odd-shaped ones lower down were metal objects in his belt pouch—key projectors, calculator, memospools and the like.

The technician perched above the projector said, "Turn around. All right. Next."

Spangler waited at the limousine door until Pembun joined him. The little man's wide, flat-nosed face expressed surprise, interest, and something else that Spangler could not quite define.

"'Ow did you ever get 'old of so many portable fluoroscopes in such a 'urry?" he asked.

Spangler smiled delightedly. "It's no miracle, Mr. Pembun, just adequate preparation. Those 'scopes have been stored and maintained, for exactly this emergency, since twenty-one eighteen."

"Four 'undred years," said Pembun wonderingly. "My! And this is the first time you've 'ad to use them?"

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"The first time." Spangler waved Pembun into the car. Following him, he continued, "But it took just under half an hour to set up the complete network. Not only the fluoroscopes were ready, but complete, detailed plans of the entire operation. All I had to do was to take them out of the files."

The car moved past the barrier.

"My!" said Pembun again. "I feel kind of like an extra nose." His eyes gleamed faintly in the half-dark as Spangler turned to look at him.

"I ask your pardon?"

"I mean," said Pembun, "it doesn't seem to me as if you rilly need me very much."

That expressionless drawl, Spangler thought, could become irritating in time. The man had been educated on Earth; why couldn't he speak properly?

"I'm sure your advice will prove invaluable, Mr. Pembun," he said smoothly. "After all, we have no one here who's actually had . . . friendly contact with the Rithians."

"That's right," said Pembun, "I almost forgot. We're so used to the Rithi, ourselves, it's kind of 'ard to remember that Earth never did any trading with them." He pronounced "Rithi" with a curious whistling fricative, something between *th* and *s*, and an abrupt terminal vowel. It was not done for swank, Spangler thought; it simply came more naturally to the man than the standardized "Rithians". Probably Pembun spoke the Rithian tongue at least as well as he spoke Standard English.

SPANGLER half-heartedly tried to imagine himself a part of Pembun's world. A piebald rabble, spawned by half a dozen sub-standard groups that had left Earth five centuries before. Haitians, French West Africans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans. Low-browed, dull-eyed loafers, breeders, drinkers and brawlers, mouthing an unbelievable tongue degraded from already corrupt English, French and Spanish. *Colonials*—in fact, if not in name.

"We couldn't do any trading with the Rithians, Mr. Pembun," he said at last, coolly. "They are not human."

"Yes, I recollec' now, Commissioner," the little man replied humbly. "It jus' slipped my mind for a minute. Shoo, I was taught about that in school. Earth's 'ad the same policy toward nonyuman cultures for the last four 'undred years. If they 'aven't got to the spaceship stage yet, put them under surveillance and make sure they don't. If they 'ave, and they're weak enough, a quick preventive war. If they're too strong, like the Rithi—delaying tactics, subversion, sabotage, divide-and-rule.

This Matter of Maturity

IF YOU have been baffled, as some profess, over the new term "maturity" as applied to science fiction—we give you Damon Knight. Ten years ago he was turning out science fiction which, like most of the material then written, was a groping in the dark, a fumbling and a trial and error. It was often formula but because there was a good mind and a genuine talent at work, even these early stories possessed healthy portions of fresh and unusual detail and a deft way with words that was truly notable in an era of plodding prose. In those days it was enough to get your idea across, much less worry about the dramatic technique of doing it. But today we have trained and matured a body of craftsmen who can not only handle ideas, but can write as well as the top producers in any writing field.

DOUBLE MEANING is as far removed from the simple stories of an earlier era as it is possible to get. It is a story of suspense on one level; it is a penetrating examination of character disintegration on another and this is a dramatic feat which would never have occurred to an early science fiction writer. Maturity? It's a step.

—*The Editor*

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Then war." He chuckled. "It makes my 'ead ache jus' thinking about it."

"That policy," Spangler informed him, "has withstood the only meaningful test. Earth survives."

"Yes, sir," said Pembun vacuously. "She certainly does."

The things, Spangler thought half in mockery, half in real annoyance, that I do for the Empire!

A touch of his forefinger at the base of the square, jeweled thumbwatch produced a soft chime and then a female voice: "Fourteen-ten and one quarter."

Spangler hesitated. It was an awkward time to call Joanna; the afternoon break, in her section, came at fourteen thirty. But if he waited until then he would be back at the Hill himself, tied up in a conference that might not end until near quitting time. It was irritating to have to speak to her in Pembun's presence, too, but there was no help for it now. He had been too busy to call earlier in the afternoon—Pembun's arrival had upset his schedule—and his superior, Keith-Ingram, had chosen to call him while he was on his way to the spaceport, occupying the whole journey with fruitless discussion.

He could have called her at any other time during the past three days, of course; he had not done so. That had been deliberate; this Rithian affair was only a convenient pretext. It was good strategy. But Spangler knew his antagonist, knew the limits of her curiosity and pride almost to the hour. Any longer delay would be dangerous.

Spangler reached for the studs of the limousine's communicator, set into the front wall of the compartment. His wristphone would have been easier and more private, but he wanted to see her face.

"You'll excuse me?" he said perfunctorily.

"Of cawse." The little men turned toward the window on his side of the car, presenting his back to Spangler and the communicator screen.

Spangler punched the number. After a moment the screen lighted and Joanna's face came into view.

"Oh—Thorne."

Her tone was poised, cool, almost expressionless—which was to say, normal. She looked at him, out of the screen's upholstered frame, with the expression that almost never altered: direct, gravely intent, receptive. Her skin and eyes were so clear, her emotional responses so deliberate and pallid, that she seemed utterly, almost abstractly normal: a type personified, a symbol, a mathematical fiction. Everything about her was refined and subdued: her gestures, movements, her rare laughter. Her face itself might have been modeled to fit the average man's notion of "aristocracy."

That, of course, was why Spangler had to have her.

IN THIS one respect, she was precisely what she looked—the Planters were one of the oldest, most powerful, and most unassailably patrician families in the Empire. Without such an alliance, Spangler knew painfully well, he had gone as far as he could, and a good deal farther than a less determined man would have hoped. With her, he would only have begun—and his children would receive, by right of birth, all that he had fought to gain.

In nearly all other ways, Joanna was a mirror of deceptions. She seemed cool and self-possessed, but was neither; she was only afraid. It was fear that delayed and censored every word she spoke, every motion: fear of betraying herself, fear of demanding too much, fear of giving too much.

He let the silence lengthen until, in another second, it would have been obvious that he was hesitating for effect. Then he said politely, "I'm not disturbing you?"

". . . No, of course not." The pause before she answered had been a trifle longer than normal.

She's hurt, Spangler thought with satisfaction.

"I would have called earlier, if I

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could," he said soberly. "This is the first free moment I've had in three days."

It was a lie, and she knew it; but it was so plausible that she could accept it, if she chose, without loss of dignity. That was the knife-edge on which Spangler had hung his fortunes. Deliberately, knowing the risk, he had drawn their relationship so thin that a touch would break it.

Had there been any other course he could have taken? Despite himself, Spangler's anxiety led him through each stage of the logic again, seeking a flaw.

Cancel the approach direct. He had asked her to marry him, for the first time, a week after they had become lovers. She had refused without hesitation and without coyness; she meant it.

Cancel the approach dialectical. Joanna had a keen and capable mind, but she could be as stubborn as any dullard. There is no argument that can wear down a woman's "I don't want to."

Cancel the approach violent: tentatively. Four days ago, at the end of a long weekend they had spent together in the Carpathians, he had tried brutality—not on impulse, but with calculated design which had achieved its primary object: he had reduced her to tears.

After that, apology and reconciliation. After that, silence: three days of it. Silence wounds more than a blow, and wounds more deeply.

Joanna had spent her whole life in retreating from things that had injured her.

But Spangler had three things on his side: Joanna's affection and need for him; ordinary human perversity, which desires a thing, however often refused, the instant it is withdrawn; and the breaking of the rhythm. Rhythm, however desirable in some aspects of the relations between sexes, is fatal in most others. Request, argument, violence . . . if he had begun the cycle again, as both of them subconsciously expected, he would simply have made his own defeat more certain.

As it was, he had weakened her resistance by making her gather it against a thrust that never came. . . .

Joanna said, "I understand. You do look tired, Thorne. You're all right, though, aren't you?"

Spangler said abruptly, "Joanna, I want to see you. Soon. Tonight. Will you meet me?"

Before, his tone had been almost as casual as hers, and he had watched the minuscule changes in her expression that meant she was softening toward him. Now he spoke urgently, and saw her stiffen again.

Never let her rest, he thought. Never let her get her balance. . . . He spoke softly again: "It will be the last time, if you decide it that way. But let me see you tonight."

". . . All right."

"Shall I send a car for you?"

She nodded, and then her image dissolved. Spangler leaned back, with a sigh, into the cushions.

"My," said Pembun, "look at awl the tawl buildings!"

II

THEY were stopped twice more before they reached Administration Hill, and went through a routine search at the entrance. From there, the trip to Security Section took less than a minute. The limousine let them out at Spangler's office door and returned automatically to the motor pool three levels below.

Contrasted with the group that was waiting at the conference table, under the hard, clear glow-lights, Pembun looked like a shabby mongrel that had somehow crawled into a thoroughbred kennel. His skin was yellowish under the brown; his jowls were wider than his naked cranium; his enormous ears stuck straight out from his head. His tunic and pantaloons were correctly cut, but he looked hopelessly awkward in them.

After all, Spangler reminded himself

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carefully, the man could not help being what he was.

"Gentlemen," he said, "allow me to present Mr. Jawj Pembun of Manhaven. Mr. Pembun was a member of the colonial government before his planet gained its independence, and since that time has been of service to the Empire in various capacities. He brings us expert knowledge of the Rithians. Lieutenant Colonel Cassina, who is our liaison with the Space Navy—his new aide, Captain Wei—Dr. Baustian of the Bureau of Alien Physiology—Mr. Pemberton of the Mayor's staff—Miss Timoney and Mr. Gordon, of this office."

Pembun shook hands with all of them without any noticeable sign of awe. To the Mayor's spokesman he said affably, "You know, Pemberton was origin'ly my family's name. They just gradually shortened it to Pembun. That's a coincidence, isn' it?"

Pemberton, a fine-boned young man with pale eyes and hair, stiffened visibly.

"I hardly think there is any relation," he said.

Spangler picked up a memo spool that lay before him and tapped it sharply against the table. "At the suggestion of the Foreign Relations Department," he said delicately, "Mr. Pembun was brought in from Ganymede especially for this emergency. I arranged for his passage through the cordon and met him personally at the spaceport." In short, gentlemen, he thought, this yokel has been wished on us by the powers that be, and we shall have to put up with him as best we can.

"Now," he said. "I imagine Mr. Pembun would like to be brought up to date before we proceed." There was a snort from Colonel Cassina which Spangler pointedly ignored. He began the story, covering the main points quickly and concisely. Pembun stopped him only once to ask a question.

"Are you sure that's all the Rithi there were to begin with—just seven?"

"No, Mr. Pembun," Spangler admitted. "We don't yet know how or by whom they were smuggled through to Earth, therefore we must consider the possibility that others are still undetected. To deal with that possibility, Security is patrolling the entire planet, using a random-based spot check system. But we know that these seven were here, and that one of them is still at large. When we find him, we hope to get all the information we need. The idea of suicide is repugnant to these Rithians, I understand."

"That's right," said Pembun soberly. "I guess you can take him alive, all right. Prob'ly could 'ave taken all seven after the accident, if your patrolmen 'adn' shot so quick."

"Those were city patrolmen," said Pemberton acidly, with a flush on his cheekbones, "not Security men. Their conduct was perfectly in order. When they arrived on the scene of the accident, and saw three men attempting to aid four others whose bodies were torn open, exposing the alien shapes underneath, they instantly fired on the whole group. Those were their orders; that was what they had been trained to do in any such event. They would have been right, even if one of the Rithians had not escaped into the crowd."

SMILING, Pembun shook his head. "I'm not so good at paradoxes," he said. "They jus' mix me up."

"There is no paradox, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler gently. "A fully equipped Security crew can take chances with an unknown force which a municipal patrol cannot. A patrolman, discovering an alien on this planet, must kill first and investigate afterwards—because an alien spy or saboteur, by definition, has unknown potentialities. Planning centuries in advance, as we must, we obviously can't foresee every possible variant of a basic situation; but we can and do lay down directives which will serve our best interests in the vast majority of cases. And we can't, Mr.

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What was in her eyes? Was it caution, pleasure or guilt?

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Pembun, we can *not* allow crucial decisions to be made on the spot by non-executive personnel."

Colonel Cassina cleared his throat impatiently. "Shall we get on?"

"Just one moment. Mr. Pembun, I want to make this point clear to you if I can. *Interpretation is the dry rot of law.* One interpretation, and the law is modified; two, the law is distorted—three hundred million, and there is no law at all, there is pure anarchy. In a small system, of course—a single planet, for example—there are only a few intermediate stages between planning and execution. But when you consider that we're dealing here with an empire of two hundred sixty planets, an aggregate of more than *eight hundred billion* people, you'll realize that directives must be rigid and policy unified.

"In an emergency, the lower-echelon official who acts according to his own personal interpretation may be right or wrong. The similar official who follows a rigid policy, prepared to meet the widest possible variety of actual situations, *will* be right—in nine hundred ninety-nine out of a thousand cases. We take the long view; we can't afford to do otherwise."

Pembun nodded seriously. He said, "We 'ad the same trouble at 'ome—on a smaller scale, of course. Right after we declared our independence, we formed a federation with the two other planets in our system, Novaya Zemlya and Reunion. It seemed like a good idea—you know, for mutual defense and so on. But we found out that to keep that big a gover'ment running we 'ad to stiffen it up something dreadful, an' some'ow or other it didn' seem to be as cheap to run as three diff'rent gover'ments, either. So we split up ag'in."

Spangler maintained his urbane expression with difficulty. Colonel Cassina's neck was brick red, and Dr. Baustian, Captain Wei and Miss Timoney were staring at Pembun in frank amazement. The others merely looked embarrassed.

Really, it was a waste of time to take any pains with a barbarian like this. Try to explain the philosophy behind the workings of the greatest empire of all time, and all Pembun got out of it was a childish analogy to the history of his own pipsqueak solar system!

He regarded the little man through narrowed lids. Come to think of it, was Pembun really as simple as he appeared, or was he snickering to himself behind that stolid yellow-brown face?

He had said several things which could only be explained by the worst of bad taste or the sheerest blind ignorance. After Spangler's reference to Manhaven's "gaining its independence" surely a polite way of putting it, since Manhaven had seceded from the Empire only on Earth's sufferance, at a time when she was occupied elsewhere—Pembun had said, "After we *declared* our independence—"

Carelessness, or deliberate, subtly pointed insult?

Was Pembun saying, "There are two hundred sixty planets and eight hundred billion people in your Empire, all right—but there used to be a lot more, and a century from now there'll be a lot less?"

Insufferable little planet-crawler. . . .

Colonel Cassina said, "Mr. Pembun, do I understand you to suggest that we too should *split up* as you put it? That the Empire should be *liquidated?*"

"Why, no, Colonel," said Pembun. "That wouldn't be any business of mine, you know. That would be up to the people that still live in the Empire to decide."

Cassina snorted and sputtered. Pemberton's face was white with indignation. It was remarkable, Spangler thought with one corner of his mind, how readily Pembun could rub them all the wrong way. If it could possibly be arranged, future meetings had better be held without him.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his voice a trifle. "Shall we continue our conference?"

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AFTER they had left, Spangler sat alone in his inner office, toying absently with the buttons that controlled the big information screen opposite his desk. He switched on one multi-colored, three-dimensional organization chart after another, without seeing any of them.

Pembun had behaved himself, in a manner of speaking, after that clash with Cassina. But the things he had said had become not merely irritating, but—disquieting.

It had begun with the usual complaint from Pemberton, speaking for the mayor. Like most every planetary and local government department except Security, the city administration wanted to know when the Rithian would be captured and the planet-wide blockade ended.

Spangler had assured him that the Rithian could not possibly remain concealed for more than a week at the utmost.

And then Pembun had remarked, "Excuse me, Commissioner, but I b'lieve it would be safer if you said two months."

"*Why*, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, because Rithi got to 'ave a lot of beryllium salts in their food. The way I see it, this one Rithch wouldn' 'ave more than six or eight weeks' supply with 'im. After that, you can either tie up all the supplies of beryllium salts, so 'e 'as to surrender or starve, or jus' watch the chemical supply 'ouses an' arrest anybody 'oo buys them. Either way, you got 'im. Might take a little more than two months. Say two and a 'alf or three."

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler said with icy patience, "that's an admirable plan, but we're not going to need it. The house checks will get our Rithian before a week is up."

"Clear ever'body out of a building, an' wawk them all past one of those fluoroscopes?"

"That's it," Spangler told him. "One area at a time, working inward from the outskirts of the city to the center."

"Uh-mm," said Pembun. "Only thing is, the Rithi got no bones."

Spangler raised his brows and glanced at Dr. Baustian. "Is that correct, doctor?"

"Well, yes, so I understand," said the physiologist tolerantly, "but I assume that would be indication enough—if the fluoroscope showed a very small cartilage and no bones at all?"

Laughter rippled around the table.

"Not," said Pembun, "if 'e swallowed a skel'ton."

Cassina said something rude in an explosive voice. Spangler, incredulous amusement bubbling up inside him, stared at Pembun. "*Swallowed* a skeleton?"

"Uh-mm. You people wouldn't know about it, I guess, because you 'aven' done any trading with the Rithi—scientific trading least of awl—but the Rithi got—" He hesitated. "Our name for it is *mudabs boyó;* I guess in Standard that would be 'protean insides.' "

"Protean!" from Dr. Baustian.

"Yes, sir. Their outside shape is fixed, almos' as much as ours, or they wouldn't need any disguises to look like a man; but the insides is pretty near all protean flesh—make it into a stomach, or a bowel, or a bladder, or w'atever they 'appen to need. They could swallow a yuman skel'ton, all right—it wouldn' inconvenience them at awl. An' they could imitate the rest of a man's insides well enough to fool you. They could make it move natural, too. That means they wouldn't need any braces or anything, jus' a plastic shell for a disguise.

"I 'ate to say it, but I don't believe those fluoroscopes are going to do much good."

In a moment, the table had been in an uproar again.

Spangler grunted, switched on his speakwrite and began to dictate a report of the conference. "To Claude Keith-Ingram, Chief Comm Dept-Secur," he said. "Most Secret. Most

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Urgent." He thought for a moment, then rapidly gave an account of Pembun's statement, adding that Dr. Baustian doubted the validity of his information, and that Pembun admitted he had never seen any actual evidence of the Rithians' alleged protean ability.

He read it over, then detached the spool and tossed it into the out tube.

He was still unsatisfied.

He had done everything he could be expected to do, exactly according to regulations. If policy were to be changed, it was not for him to change it. Logic and instinct both assured him that Pembun was not to be taken seriously.

But there was something else Pembun had said that still bothered him, for a reason he could not explain. He had not included it in his report; it would have seemed—to put it mildly—frivolous.

Pembun had said:

"There's one more thing you got to watch out for—those Rithi got a 'ell of a sense of yumor."

It was fifteen-twenty; there would be time before he met Joanna.

Spangler passed his hand over the intercom. "Gordon," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you find quarters for Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"G level, section seven, suite one eleven."

"Right," said Spangler, flicking his hand over the intercom to break the connection. He stood up, walked out of the office, and buzzed a scooter.

"G level," he said into its mechanical ear.

III

THE door of suit 111 was ajar. Inside, a baritone voice was singing to the accompaniment of some stringed instrument. Spangler paused and listened.

Odum Páwkee mónt a mut-ting
Vágis cásh odum Paw-kée
Odum Páwkee mónt a mut-ting
Tóuda por tásh o cáw-fée!

There was a final chord, then a hollow wooden thump and jangle as the instrument was set down; then the clink of ice cubes in a glass.

Spangler put his hand over the doorplate. The chime was followed by Pembun's voice calling, "Come awn in!"

Pembun was comfortably slumped in a recliner, with his collar undone and his feet high. The glass in his hand, judging by color, contained straight whiskey. On a low table at his side were the remains of a man-sized meal, a decanter, an ice bucket and several clean glasses, and the instrument—a tiny, round-bellied thing with three strings.

The little man swung himself lithely around and rose. "I was 'oping somebody would cawl," he said happily. "Gets kind of lonesome in this place—lonesomer than the mountings a thousand miles from anybody, some'ow. 'Ere, take the company seat, Commissioner. A glawss of w'iskey?"

Spangler took an upright chair. "This will do nicely," he said. "No thanks to the whiskey—I haven't your stomach."

Pembun looked startled, then smiled. "I'll get them to sen' up some soda," he said. He swung himself into the recliner again, reached for the intercom and gave the order.

"W'y I looked surprised for a minute w'en you said that," he explained, turning sidewise on the recliner, "is becawse we got an expression on Man'aven. W'en we say, 'I 'aven' got your stomach,' that means I don' like you, we're not sympathetic. *'E nó ay to stomá.'*"

Spangler felt an unexpected twinge of guilt—of course Pembun knew he wasn't liked—and then a wave of irritation. Damn the man! How did he always manage to put one in the wrong?

He kept his voice casual and friendly. "What was that you were singing, just before I came in?"

"Oh, that—'Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting.'" He picked up the instrument and sang the chorus Spangler had

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heard. Spangler listened, charmed in spite of himself. The melody was simple and jaunty—the kind of thing, he told himself, that would go well sung on muleback . . . or the backs of whatever ill-formed beasts the Manhavenites used instead of mules.

Pembun put the instrument down. "In English, that means, 'Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, clouds 'ide Old Man Pawkey. Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, all for a cup of coffee!' "

"Is there more?"

Pembun made his eyes comically wide. "Oh, shoo! There's 'bout a trillion verses. I only know every tenth one, about, but we'd be 'ere all night if I sang 'em. It's kind of a saga. Old Man Pawkey was a settler who lived up in the Desperation Mountings in the early days. That's in the temperate zone, but even so it's awful wild country, all straight up and straight down. 'E loved coffee, you know, but of course there wasn' any. Well, 'e 'eard there was some in the spaceport town, Granpeer, down in the plateau country, and 'e went there, on foot. Twenty-two 'undred kilometers. Or so they say."

The conveyor door popped open, Pembun went over to get the soda and pour Spangler a drink. "There were some big things done in those days," he added, "but there were some big lies told, too."

SPANGLER felt an obscure shock that left him jumpy again. In the conscious effort to sympathize with Pembun, to understand the man in his own terms, he had managed to build up a picture which was really not too hard to admire: the wild, colorful, free life of the frontier, the hardships accepted and conquered, the deeds of heroism casually done, et cetera, et cetera. It was the sort of life Spangler himself had dreamed of in his early youth, before he had realized that it was a hopeless anachronism; that the only career for an ambitious man was not adventure, not discovery, but control.

And then Pembun himself, in half a sentence, had indifferently rejected that picture. "There were some big lies told, too."

Pembun didn't believe in the Empire; all right. But—if he had no respect for his own planet's traditions, then what in the name of sanity *did* he believe in?

Spangler was a man who tried hard to be liberal. But now, staring at Pembun's round brown face, the yellowish whites of his eyes, he thought once more: It's a waste of time to try to understand this man. He's not civilized; he thinks like an animal. There's simply *no point of contact.*

He said abruptly, "At the meeting, you mentioned something about the Rithian's 'sense of humor.' What, exactly, did you mean?"

He was thinking: In a few minutes I'll be back in my office. I'll drink half of this highball, precisely, and then go.

Pembun leaned back in the relaxer, head turned slightly, eyes alert on Spangler. "Well," he said, "they're kind of peculiar, in this way. They're a real 'ighly-advanced people, technologically—you know that. But the things that strike them funny remind you more of a kind of backwoods planet, like Man'aven. Maybe that's w'y we got along so well with them—Man'aven yumor is kind of primitive. Pulling out a chair w'en a man goes to sit down. That kind of thing. But they beat us.

"They'll go forty kilos out of their way to play a joke, even w'en it isn' good business. I've 'eard a novel written by one of their big authors—twelve spools, mus' be more than five 'undred thousan' words long—jus' so 'e could build up to a dirty joke at the end. It was a bes'-seller in their solar system. An' they're crazy about puns—plays on words. Some of their sentences you're suppose' to read as many as fifteen, twenty different ways."

Spangler's memory groped uneasily for a moment and then produced a relevant fact. "Like Joyce," he said. "The

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twentieth-century decadent."

"Uh-mm," Pembun agreed. "I use' to be able to quote pages of *Finnegans Wake*. 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation. . . .' That's primer talk, compared to Rithi literature."

Spangler swallowed deliberately and set his glass down on the wide arm of his chair. He felt the vast, cool, good-humored patience of a man who knows how to retreat from his own petty emotions. "I don't want to seem obtuse," he said, "but has this got anything to do with my problem?"

Pembun's brows creased delicately. He looked anxious, searching for words. "Nothing, *specifically*," he said earnestly. "W'at I mean is jus' that in general, you got to watch out for that sense of yumor. I mean, you already know that this Rithi is going to 'urt you bad if 'e can. But you got to remember also that if 'e can, 'e's going to do it some way that'll be side-splittingly funny to 'im. It isn' easy to figure out w'ich way a Rithch is going to jump, but you can do it sometimes if you know w'at makes them lahf."

Spangler swallowed again, leaving exactly half the drink behind, and stood up. He was a trifle impatient with himself for having come here at all, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that a lead had been explored and canceled out: that an x had been corrected to a zero.

"Thank you, Mr. Pembun," he said from the doorway; "for the drink and the information. Good evening."

"You got to look out for that 'ypnotism, too," said Pembun as an afterthought.

Spangler stood in the doorway, strangling. Pembun looked at him with a politely inquiring expression.

"Hypnotism!" Spangler said, and started back into the room. "What hypnotism?"

"My goodness," cried Pembun, "didn' you know about *that?*"

IV

THEY lay together in companionable silence, in a darkened room, facing the huge unscreened window—window in the archaic sense, a simple hole in the wall—through which a feather-light touch of cool, salt air came unhindered. On either side, where the shore thrust out an arm, Spangler could see a cluster of multicolored lights—Angels proper on the right, St. Monica on the left. Straight ahead was nothing but silver sea and ghost-grey cloud, except when the tiny spark of an airship crossed silently and was gone.

The universe was a huge, half-felt presence that flowed through the open window to contain them; as if, Spangler thought, they were two grains of dust sunk in an ocean that stretched to infinity.

It was soothing, in a way, but there was a touch of unpleasantness in it. Spangler shifted his body restlessly, feeling the breeze fumble at his bare skin. The scale was too big, he thought; he was too used to the rabbit-warren of the Hill, perhaps, to be entirely easy outside it. Perhaps he needed a change. . . .

"That wind is getting a little chilly," he said. "Let's close the window and turn on the lights."

"I thought it was nice," she said. "But go ahead, if you like."

Now I've insulted her window, Spangler thought wryly. Nevertheless, he reached forward and found the stud that rolled a sheet of vitrin down over the opening.

It was a period piece, the window—Twenty First Century, even to the antique servo mechanism that operated it. So was everything else in Joanna's tower; the absurd four-legged chairs, the massive tables, the carpets, even the huge pneumatic couch. There were paper books in the shelves, and not the usual decorator's choices, either, but books that a well-read twenty-first-century citizen might actually have owned

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—Shakespeare and Sterne, Jones and Joyce, Homer and Hemingway all jumbled in together. If the fashion would let her, Spangler thought, I believe she would wear skirts.

A glow of rose-tinted light sprang up, and he turned to see Joanna with one slender arm around her knees, her head bent solemnly over the lighted cigarette she had just taken from the dispenser. She handed him another.

Spangler pulled himself up beside her and leaned against the back of the couch. The smoke of their cigarettes fanned out, pink in the half-light, and faded slowly into floating haze.

The room's curved walls and ceiling enclosed them snugly, safely. . . .

The Twenty First Century, the Century of Peace, was a womb, Spangler thought. The image was not his, but Joanna's; she had picked it up in some book or other. "A womb with a view." That was it. A childishly fanciful description, as one would expect of that period, but accurate enough. Self-deception was not one of Joanna's vices—unfortunately.

To win her finally and completely, it would be necessary to break down the clear image she had of herself—cast her adrift in chaos, so that she would turn blindly to him for her lost security. It was not going to be easy.

Joanna said, without moving, "Thorne, I'd like to talk seriously to you, just for a minute."

"Of course."

"You know what I'm going to say, probably; but just to have things clear—do you want us to go on together?"

Matching her tone, Spangler said, "Yes."

". . . I do too. You know I'm fonder of you than I've ever been of anyone. But I won't ever marry you. You've got to believe that, and accept it, or it's no good . . . I'm trying to be fair."

"You're succeeding," Spangler told her lightly. He turned and put his hand on her knee. "Just to be equally clear—I've been insufferable to you, and I was a maniac last weekend, and I'm sorry. Shall we both forget it?"

She smiled. "Yes. We will."

Her lips moved and altered as he leaned toward her: corners turning downward, pink moist flesh swelling up into the blind shape of desire. His free arm sank into the softness of her back, abruptly hard as her body tautened. Eyes closed, he heard the sibilant whisper of her legs slowly straightening against the counterpane. . . .

AFTERWARD, he lay wrapped in a warm lethargy that was like floating in quiet water. It was an effort to force himself out of that mindless content, but it was necessary. As he was vulnerable at this moment, so was she. When she spoke to him lazily, he answered her with increasing constraint, until he felt his tension flow into her.

Then he rolled over abruptly, got up and stood at the window. Staring out at the vast, obscene emptiness of sky and sea. Now it was easier. As he had often, in his childhood, worked himself deliberately into white-hot anger—when, if he had not forced himself to be angry, he would have been afraid—now, with equal deliberateness, he opened his mind to despair.

Suppose that I failed, and lost Joanna, he thought. But that was not enough. What would be the most dreadful thing that could possibly happen? The answer came of itself: Pembun, and his Rithians with their boneless bodies and their hypnotism. Shapeless faces staring in from a sea of darkness. *Suppose they won.* Suppose the Empire went down under that insensate wave, and all the walls everywhere crumbled to let smothering Chaos in?

Her voice: "Thorne? Is anything the matter?"

He pulled himself back, shuddering, from the cold emptiness that his mind had fastened upon. For an instant it had been real, it had happened, it was *there.* He had been lost and alone, fumbling in an endless night.

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When he turned, he knew that his agony showed plainly in his face. He did his best to restrain and suppress it: that would show too.

"Nothing," he said. He walked around the couch, reached past her for a cigarette, then moved to the closet.

"You're going?" she asked uncertainly.

"I've got to be in early tomorrow," he said. "And I've been running a little short of sleep."

". . . All right."

Fastening his cloak, he went to her and took her hand. "Don't mind me, will you? I'm a little jumpy—it's been an unpleasant week. I'll call you tomorrow."

Her lips smiled, but her eyes were wide and unfocused. Caution was in them, and a hint of something else—pleasure, perhaps, touched with guilt?

He rode home with a feeling of satisfaction that deepened into a fierce joy. If she learned that she could hurt him, learned to expect it, learned to like it, then in time she could endure the thought of being hurt in return. It was only necessary to go slowly, advancing and retreating, shifting his ground, stripping her defenses gradually; until at last, whether for guilt or pleasure or love, she would marry him.

For love and pleasure, fear and hatred, honor and ambition were all doors that could be opened or shut.

Pain was the key: . . .

EARLY the following morning, alone in his inner office, Spangler sat composedly and looked into his desk vision screen, from which the broad, grey face of Claude Keith-Ingram stared back at him.

"You asked Pembun why he hadn't divulged this information earlier?" Keith-Ingram demanded sharply.

"I did," Spangler said. "He answered that he had assumed we already knew of it, since the Empire was known to possess the finest body of knowledge in the field of security psychology in the inhabited Galaxy."

"Hmm," said Spangler's superior, frowning. "*Sarcasm*, do you think?"

Spangler hesitated. "I should like to be able to answer that with a definite no, but I can't be sure. Pembun is not an easy man to fathom."

"So I understand," said Keith-Ingram. "However, he has an absolutely impeccable record in the Outworld service. I don't think there can be any question of actual disloyalty."

Spangler was silent.

"Well, then," said Keith-Ingram testily, "what about this alleged pseudo-hypnotic ability of the Rithians? What does it amount to?"

"According to Pembun, complete control under very favorable conditions. He says, however, that the process is rather slow and limited in extent. In other words, that a Rithian might be able to take control of one or two persons if it could get them alone and unsuspecting, but that it would be unable to control a large group at any time or even a small group in an emergency."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Now, about this other matter of the protean faculty —" he glanced down at something on his own desk, outside the range of the scanner—"none of the available agents who have served in the Rithian system have anything even suggestive to report in that regard."

Spangler nodded. "That could mean anything or nothing."

"Yes," said the grey man. "On the whole, I'm inclined to feel as you evidently do, that there's nothing in it. Pembun may be competent and so on, but he's not Earth and he's not Security. Still, I don't have to remind you that if he's right on all counts, we've got a *very* serious situation on our hands."

Spangler smiled grimly and nodded again. Keith-Ingram was noted for his barbed understatements. *If* Pembun was right, then it followed that the Empire's agents in the Rithian system had carried back no more information than the Rithians wanted them to have. . . .

Keith-Ingram rubbed his chin with a

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square, well-manicured hand. "Now, to date the normal procedures haven't produced any result."

"That's correct," Spangler admitted. Using all available personnel, it would take another four days to complete the house checks. Before that time, negative results would prove nothing.

"And according to Pembun, those procedures are no good. Now, has he proposed any alternate method, other than that beryllium-salts scheme of his?"

"No, sir. He held out no hope of results from that one under two and a half months."

"Well, he may have something more useful to suggest. Ask him. If he does —try it."

"Right," said Spangler.

"Good," said the grey man, giving Spangler his second-best smile. "Keep in touch, Thorne—and if anything else odd turns up, don't hesitate to call me direct."

The screen cleared.

Spangler stared at the vacant screen for a few moments, pursing his lips thoughtfully, then leaned back, absently fingering the banks of control studs at the edge of his desk. After a moment, he found himself mentally reviewing the film, taken in the Rithian system, which had been used in briefing Security personnel for the spy search.

First you saw only a riotous, bewildering display of green and gold; the shapes were so unfamiliar that the mind took several seconds to adjust. Then you perceived that the green was a swaying curtain of broad-leafed vines; the splashes of gold were intricate, many-petaled blossoms. Behind, barely noticeable, was a spidery framework of metal, and beyond that, an occasional glimpse of mist-blue that suggested open space.

Then the Rithian moved into view.

At first you thought "Spiders!", and Spangler remembered that he had jumped; spiders were a particular horror of his. Then, when the thing stopped in front of the camera, you saw that it was no more like a spider than like an octopus or a monkey.

CURIOUSLY, its outline most resembled those of the great golden blossoms. There was a circlet of tentacles, lying in gentle S-curves, and below that another. The thing's body was a soft sac that dangled beneath the lower set of tentacles; there was a head, consisting almost entirely of two huge, dull-red eyes. The creature's body was covered with short, soft-looking ochre fur or spines.

To some people, Spangler supposed, it would be beautiful: the sort of people who professed to find beauty in the striped, oval bodies of big beetles.

The thing turned quickly, hung still for another moment, and then clambered in a blur of limbs up the vine again.

Then there was another scene: darker green, this time—the gloom of a forest rather than a garden city. A Rithian moved into view, clinging to the slick purplish bole of a tree. Three of its fore-tentacles held a long, slender object that was obviously a weapon. It hung motionless for some minutes; then the gun moved slightly and a brilliant thread of violet flame lanced out from it. Far in the background something reddish shrieked and plummeted through the branches.

That was all, but that little was impressive enough. The weapon the film showed, evidently the equivalent of a light sporting rifle, compared favorably in performance with a Mark LV Becket.

There were other films; Spangler had not seen them, but he could imagine the kind of thing they must be. Pictures of Rithian factories, Rithian spaceships, Rithian laboratories. No matter what they were like in detail, in mass they had been impressive enough to convince Earth's strategists that making war on the Rithians might be disastrous.

So the slow campaign had begun: economic sabotage, subversion, propa-

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ganda. Nothing overt; nothing that could be surely traced to the Earthmen masquerading as Non-Empire traders in the Rithian system. The tiny disruption bombs that had destroyed many another, weaker world would not be planted: the Rithians were a space-faring people, with colonies and a space fleet, and such a people can retaliate if their home world is destroyed. The campaign would be simply one of slow, patient attrition, designed to weaken the Rithians as a race and as a galactic nation; to divide them politically, hamper them economically and intellectually; to enmesh them in so subtle a net of difficulties that eventually, without knowing how it had come about, the Rithians would find that the crest of the wave had passed them by; that they were settling into the trough of history. It would take centuries, but Earth could wait.

Well, the Rithians *had* discovered their enemies. And now the situation was grotesquely changed. No part of Earth's knowledge of the Rithians could any longer be considered reliable. The Rithians might be stronger or weaker than had been thought; the one thing that appeared certain was that they were not as they appeared in the films and the written reports that had reached Earth.

Even the best planning could not always succeed, Spangler thought. It was conceivable that Earth had finally met an antagonist against whom neither force nor subtlety would be of any use. Wonderingly, Spangler allowed his mind to focus on the idea of a universe in which the human race had been exterminated, like so many other races which had met superior force, superior subtlety. It was like trying to imagine the universe going forward after one's own death; his mind pulled back from it instinctively, shaken and alarmed.

AT ANY rate, the game was not yet played out; and, Spangler reminded himself wryly, he was not charged with the responsibility of revising the Empire's military policy. He had one simple task to perform:

Find the Rithian.

Which brought him inevitably back to Pembun. Spangler's irritation returned, and grew. With a muttered "*Damn* the man!" he stood and began pacing restlessly up and down his office.

Spangler was a career executive, not a Security operative; but he knew himself to be conscientious, thorough, interested in his work—and he had been in the Department for fifteen years. He ought not to feel about anyone as he felt about Pembun: baffled, uneasy, his mind filled with shadowy suspicions that had no source and no direction.

He had been through Pembun's dossier not once but three times: Keith-Ingram was right, the man's record was absolutely clean. But—Spangler stopped pacing. There was one thing which the dossier did not explain, and it was the first thing an agent of Security should want to know about any man.

"What does he *want?*" Spangler asked aloud.

That was it: it located the sore spot that had been bothering Spangler for two days. What was Pembun after, what did he hope to accomplish? His talk was subtly flavored with amused contempt for the Empire and admiration for the Rithians. Then why was he working for one to defeat the other?

That was the thing to find out.

V

THE flow chart of Administration Hill was enormously complex. Processions of speedsters, coptercars and limousines merged, mingled and separated again; scooters, for intramural transport, moved in erratic lines among the lager vehicles and darted along the interoffice channels reserved for them alone. Traffic circles and cloverleaves directed and disturbed the flow. At every instant vehicles slipped out of the mainstream, discharged or loaded pas-

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sengers, and were gone again.

The cars, individually, were silent. In the aggregate, they produced a sound that just crossed the threshold of audibility: a single sustained note which blended itself with the hum of a million conversations, the shuffling of a million feet. The resulting sound was that of an enormous, idling dynamo.

Pembun's movements traced a thin, wavering line across all this ordered confusion. And wherever he passed, amusement spread in his wake.

At the intersection of Corridors Baker and One Zero, he tried to dismount from a scooter before it had come to a complete stop. The scooter's safety field caught him, half on and half off, and held him, his limbs waving like an angry beetle's, until it was safe to put him down.

A ripple of laughter spread, and some of the recordists and codex operators, with nothing better to do in their morning break, followed him into the Section D commissary.

His experience with the scooter seemed to have dazed the little man. He boarded the moving strip inside the commissary and then simply stood there, watching the room swing past him. He made a complete circuit, passing a dozen empty tables, and began another. The recordists and codex girls nudged their friends and pointed him out.

On the third circuit, Pembun appeared to realize that he would eventually have to get off. He put out a foot gingerly, then drew it back. He faced in the other direction, decided that was worse, and turned around again. Finally, with desperate resolution, he stepped off the slowly-moving strip. His feet somehow got tangled. Pembun sat down with a thud that shook the floor.

The laughter spread again. A man at a strip-side table got something caught in his windpipe and had to have his back pounded. Diners at more distant locations stood up to see what was happening. Half a dozen people, trying to hide their smiles, helped Pembun to his feet.

Pembun wandered out again. A blue-capped official guide came forward, determinedly helpful, but Pembun, with vehement gestures, explained that he was all right and knew where he was going.

His bones ached, from his coccyx all the way up to his cranium. That had been his sixth pratt-fall of the morning, and there were others still to come.

He felt more than a little foolish—this place was so *big!* but he plowed through the press at the commissary entrance, signaled for another scooter and rode it half a kilometer down the corridor.

ON THE walkway, just emerging from one of the offices, was a group which included two people he knew: the darkly mustachioed Colonel Cassina and his expressionless aide, Captain Wei. Pembun waved happily and once more tried to get off the scooter before it had stopped.

He writhed frantically in the tingling, unpleasant grip of the safety field. When it set him down at last, he charged forward, slipped, lost his balance, and—

The jar traveled all the way up his spine and exploded against the back of his head. He looked up, dazedly.

The group wore a collective expression of joyful disbelief. There were suppressed gurglings, as of faulty plumbing; a nervous giggle or two from the feminine contingent; snickers from the rear. Colonel Cassina allowed himself a single snort of what passed with him for laughter. Even the impassive Captain Wei emitted a peculiar, high-pitched series of sounds which might be suggested by *"Tchee! tchee! tchee!"*

Helpful hands picked Pembun up and dusted him off. Cassina, his face stern again, said gruffly, "Don't get off before the thing stops, man. That way you won't get hurt." He turned away, then came back, evidently feeling the point needed more stress. *"Don't get off before the thing stops.* Understand?"

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Pembun nodded, wordless. Mouth half open, he watched Cassina and Wei as they boarded a tandem scooter and swung off up Corridor Baker.

When he turned around, a disheveled Gordon was looming over him. "There you are!" cried the young man. "Really, Mr. Pembun, I've been looking for you upwards of an hour. Didn't you hear your annunciator buzzing?"

Pembun glanced at the instrument strapped to his right wrist. The movable cover was turned all the way to the left. "My!" he said. "I never thought about it, Mr. Gordon. Looks like I 'ad it turned off all the time."

Gordon smiled with his lips. "Well, I've found you, anyhow, sir. Can you come along to the Commissioner's office now? He's waiting to see you."

Without waiting for an answer, Gordon simultaneously hailed a tandem scooter and spoke into the instrument at his wrist.

"That's fine," said Pembun happily. "That was w'ere I 'ad a mind to go, any-'ow."

He boarded the scooter in front of Gordon, and this time followed Cassina's advice. He waited until the scooter had come to a complete stop, got off without difficulty, and strolled cheerfully into Spangler's office.

"Sorry I was 'ard to find," he said apologetically. "I 'ad my mind on w'at I was doing, and I didn' notice I 'ad my communicator turned off."

"Perfectly all right, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler, with iron patience. "Sit down. That's all, Gordon, thanks." He turned to Pembun. "Your suggestions are being followed up," he said curtly. "My immediate superior has directed me to ask you if you can help us still further by suggesting some new line of attack—one, for preference, which won't require two or three months."

"I was working on that," Pembun told him, "and not getting much of any-w'ere. But it doesn't matter now. I got another idea, and I was lucky. I found your Rithch."

As Spangler's face slowly froze, Pembun added, "'E's Colonel Cassina's aide, Captain Wei."

Spangler began in a strangled voice, "Are you seriously saying—" He stopped, pressed a stud on the edge of his desk, and began again. "This conversation is being recorded, Mr. Pembun. You have just said that you have found the Rithian, and that he is Captain Wei. Tell me your reasons."

"Well, I better start at the beginning," said Pembun, "otherwise it won't make sense. You see, I 'ad a notion this Rithch might be a little worried. The fluoroscopes wouldn' bother 'im, of cawse, but the planet-wide embargo would. And so far as 'e knew, you might bring up something that would work better than fluoroscopes. So I thought it jus' might be possible that 'e'd 'ide 'imself in the middle of the people that were looking for 'im. That way, 'e'd be able to dodge your search squads, and 'e might stand a chance of getting 'imself out through the cordon. That was w'y 'e picked Colonel Cassina, seemingly. Any'ow, I thought it would strike 'im funny.

"So I went around making people lahf, jus' taking a chance. It was kind of 'ard, becawse like I told you, the Rithi got a primitive sense of yumor. Now, if you go and fall on your be'ind in front of a Rithch, 'e's going to lahf. 'E can't 'elp 'imself. That's wat Captain Wei did. Ive 'eard the Rithi lahf before. It sounds enough like yuman lahfter to fool you if you're not paying attention, but once you've 'eard it you'll never be mistaken. I'm telling you the truth, Commissioner. Captain Wei is the Rithch."

Spangler, his lips thin, put his hand over the communicator plate. "Dossier on Captain Wei," he said.

"If you'll excuse me, Commissioner, I don' know w'ether 'e knows 'e gave 'imself away or not. If 'e knows we're after im and we don' catch 'im pretty quick, 'e's liable to do something we won't like."

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Spangler glanced at Pembun, his face sharp with irritation, and started to speak. Then his desk communicator buzzed and he put his hand over it. "Yes?"

Gordon's worried voice said, "There *is* no dossier on Captain Wei, Commissioner. I don't understand how it could have happened. Do you want me to check with District Archives in Denver?"

After a moment Spangler shot another glance at Pembun, a look compounded of excitement, intense dislike and unwilling respect. He said, "Do it later, Gordon. Meanwhile, get me Colonel Cassina, and then call the guardroom. I want all the available counter-Rithian trainees with full equipment, and I want them *now*."

THERE was no doubt about it: "Captain Wei" was the Rithian spy. Somewhere, somehow, it must have managed to meet Cassina and make friends with him; or, at any rate, contrived to remain in his company long enough to take over control of Cassina's mind—to convince him, probably, that "Wei" was an old and valued friend, with whom Cassina had worked elsewhere; that "Wei" was now free to accept a new assignment, and that Cassina had already arranged for his transfer.

Introduced by Cassina, the supposed Chinese officer had passed without question. But there was no dossier in the files bearing that name. "Captain Wei" did not exist.

All this time, Spangler thought with a shudder, that monster had been living in their midst, sitting at their conferences, hearing everything that was planned against it. It must have been hard for it not to laugh.

The bitterest thing of all was that Pembun had found it. If it ever got out that a moon-faced colonial had solved Spangler's problem for him by falling on his rear all over Administration Hill. . . .

Spangler impatiently put the thought out of his mind. They were at the doorway to Cassina's private office. "Wei" was in the smaller office immediately beyond; it communicated both with Cassina's suite and with the outer offices.

He saw the squad leader raise his watch to his ear. By now the other half of the detail would have reached the outer offices and quietly evacuated them. It must be time to go in.

The squad leader opened the door, and Spangler stepped in past him. Pembun was immediately behind; then came the five operatives, all armed with immobilizing field projectors, and Mark XX "choppers"—energy weapons which, in the hands of a skilled operator, would slice off an arm or leg—or tentacle—as neatly as a surgeon could do it.

The operatives were encased from head to foot in tight, seamless gasproofs. The upper halves of their faces were covered by transparent extensions of the helmets; the rest of the face-coverings, with the flexible tubes that led to oxygen tanks on their backs, dangled open on their chests.

This, at any rate, was according to standard operating procedure. The Rithian was urgently wanted alive, but no chances could or would be taken. "Wei's" room would be shut off by two planar force screens, one projected by the standard equipment in Cassina's desk, the other by a portable projector set up by the squad in the outer offices. At the same instant, the air-onditioning ducts serving the room would be blocked off. Inside that airtight compartment, the operatives would simultaneously gas and immobilize the Rithian; and if anything went wrong, they would use the choppers. It was a maneuver that had been rehearsed by these men a hundred times.

Spangler had told Cassina nothing—had only asked if Wei were in his office, then had hesitated as if changing his mind and promised to call back in a few minutes. Now Cassina stood up behind his desk, eyes bulging. "What's this? What's this?" he said incredulously.

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"Wei," Spangler said. "Stand out of the way, please, Colonel. I'll explain in a moment."

"Explain!" said Cassina sharply. "See here, Spangler—"

The squad leader moved forward to the closed door of the inner office. At his signal, three of the remaining men took positions in front of the door; the other moved to herd Cassina out from behind his desk.

Cassina stepped aside, then moved suddenly and violently. Spangler, frozen with shock, saw him stiff-arm the approaching operative and instantly hurl himself into the group at the door. The group dissolved into a maelstrom of motion; then the door was open, Cassina had disappeared, and the others were untangling themselves and streaming in after him.

SPANGLER found himself running forward. A wisp of something acrid caught his throat; muffled shouts rang in his ears. A man's green-clad back blocked his view for an instant, then he darted to one side and could see.

The Rithian, his back oddly humped, was half-crouched over the dangling, limp body of Colonel Cassina. The monster's hands were clenched around Cassina's throat.

Everything was very clear, highly magnified.

A voice Spangler knew suddenly filled the room. Evidently the loudspeaker system had been turned on, though why they had got Joanna to declaim, *"The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain. . . ."* Spangler really could not say.

It was very strange.

Everything had suddenly gone dead still, and the room was tilting very slowly to a vertiginous angle, while the tensed body of the Rithian—or was it really Captain Wei?—collapsed with equal slowness over the body of his victim. Spangler tried languidly to adjust himself to the tilting of the room, but he seemed to be paralyzed. There was no sensation in any part of his body. Then the floor got bigger and bigger, and at last turned into a dazzling mottled display that he watched for a long time before it greyed and turned dark.

"What happened?"

That was just the question Spangler wanted answered; he wished they had let him ask it himself. He tried to say something, but another voice cut in ahead of him.

"He went into the room without a suit. The gas got him."

Whom were they talking about? Slowly it dawned on Spangler that it was himself. That was it; that was why everything had been so strange a moment ago—

He opened his eyes. He was lying on the couch in his own private office. Two medical technicians, in pale-green smocks, were standing near the head of the couch. Farther down were Gordon, Miss Timoney and the squad leader. Pembun was sitting in a chair against the wall.

One of the medics languidly picked up Spangler's wrist and held it for a few seconds, then gently thumbed back one eyelid. "He's all right," he said, turning in Gordon's direction. "No danger at all." He moved away, and the other medic followed him out of the room.

Spangler sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the couch, and drew several deep breaths. He still felt a little dazed, but his head was clearing. He said to the leader, "Tell me what happened."

The leader had removed his gasproof and was standing, bare-headed, in orange tights and high-topped shoes. He had an olive face, with heavy black brows and a stiff brush of greying black hair. He said, "You got a whiff of the gas, Commissioner."

"I know that, man," Spangler said irritably. "Tell me the rest."

"Colonel Cassina attacked us and forced his way into the inner office," the leader said. "We were taken by surprise, but we fired the gas jets and then

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got inside as fast as we could. When we got inside, we found the Rithian apparently trying to throttle Colonel Cassina. My men and I used the choppers, but, not to excuse ourselves, Commissioner, the Colonel interfered with our aim. The Rithian was killed."

Spangler felt an abrupt wave of nausea, and mastered it with an effort. "Colonel Cassina? How is he?"

"In bad shape, I understand, Commissioner."

"He's in surgery now, sir," Gordon put in. "He's alive, but his throat is crushed."

Spangler stood up a little shakily. "What's been done with the Rithian?"

"I've had the body taken down to the lab, sir," Gordon said. "Dr. Baustian is there now. But they're waiting for your orders before they go ahead."

"All right," said Spangler, "let's get on with it."

He caught a glimpse of Pembun, with a curious expression on his face, trailing along behind the group as they left.

VI

AT FIRST the corpse looked like the body of a young Chinese murdered by a meticulously careful axe-fiend: there was a gaping wound straight down from forehead to navel, then a perpendicular cross-cut, and then another gash down each leg.

Then they peeled the human mask away, and underneath lay the Rithian. The worst of it, Spangler thought, was the ochre fur: it was soft-looking, and a darker color where it was rumpled—like the fur of the teddy bear he remembered from his childhood. But this was an obscene teddy bear, a thing of limp tentacles and dull bulging red eyes, with a squashy bladder in the middle. It ought to have been stepped on, Spangler thought, and put into the garbage tube and forgotten.

It filled the human shell exactly. The top ring of tentacles had been divided, three on each side, to fit into "Wei's" arms. In the middle of each clump of tentacles, when the lab men pried them apart, was the white skeleton of a human arm; the shoulder joint emerged just under the ring. The tentacles in the second ring had been coiled neatly around the body, out of the way. The rest of the torso, and the leg spaces, had been filled by a monstrous, muscular bulging of the Rithian's sac-like abdomen.

Then the dissection started . . .

Spangler stayed only because he could not think of a suitable excuse to leave; Cassina was still in shock and could not be seen.

Baustian and the other bio men were like children with new toys: first the muscles, and the nerve and blood and lymph systems in the "legs" the Rithian had formed from its shapeless body; then, when they cut open the torso, one bloody lump after another held up, and prodded, and exclaimed over. "Good Lord, look at this pancreas!" or "this liver!" or "that kidney!".

In the end, the ressemblance to a teddy bear was nothing at all. The most horrible thing was that the more they cut, the more human the body looked. . . .

Later, he was standing in front of Cassina's door, and Pembun was holding his arm. "Don' tell 'im the Rithi is dead," the little man said urgently. "Tell 'im it was all a mistake. Let 'im think w'at 'e likes of you. It may be important."

"Why?" Spangler asked vacantly.

Pembun looked at him with that same odd, haunted expression Spangler had noticed before, when they had left his office. He ought to be feeling cocky, Spangler thought vaguely, but he isn't. Why, why—

"E's still in danger, Commissioner. 'E's not responsible for 'is own actions. You've got to convince 'im that you weren't after Wei at all, and that Wei's all right, otherwise I believe 'e'll try to kill 'imself."

"I don't understand you," Spangler said. "How do you know the doctors or

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nurses haven't already told him?"

"I told them not to say anything," Pembun said, unabashed, "and let them think the order came from you."

Spangler's lips tightened. "We'll talk about this later," he said, and palmed the doorplate.

CASSINA'S eyes were closed. His face was a dead olive-grey except for a slight flush on either cheekbone. He had the stupid, defenseless look of all sleeping invalids.

His head was supported by a hollow in the bolster; a rigid harness covered his neck. His mouth was slightly open under the coarse black mustachios, and a curved suction tube was hooked over his lower teeth.

The tube emitted a low, monotonous gurgling, which changed abruptly to a dry sucking noise. An attendant stepped forward and joggled the tube with one finger; the gurgling resumed.

As Spangler glanced away from the unconscious man, a medic came forward. He was tall and loose-limbed; his brown eyes gleamed with the brilliance that meant contact lenses. "Commissioner Spangler?"

Spangler nodded.

"I'm Dr. Householder, in charge of this section. You can question this man now, but I want you to avoid exciting him if you can, and don't stay longer than fifteen minutes after the injection. He's got half the pharmacopoeia in him already."

Spangler stepped forward and sat down by the bedside. At Householder's nod, a horse-faced female attendant set the muzzle of a pressure hypodermic against Cassina's bare forearm. She pressed the trigger, then unscrewed the magazine, dropped it into a tray and replaced it with another. In a moment Cassina sighed and opened his eyes.

Another attendant set a metal plate on the bed under Cassina's hand and gently forced a stylus between his fingers. Cables from plate and stylus led back around the foot of the bed to a squat, wheeled machine with a hooded screen. The attendant went to the machine, snapped a switch and then sat down beside it.

Cassina's eyes turned slowly until he discovered Spangler. He frowned, and seemed to be trying to speak. His lips moved minutely, but his jaw still hung open, with the suction tube hooked inside it. The monotonous gurgling of withdrawn sputum continued.

"Don't try to talk," Spangler said. "Your throat and jaws are immobilized. Use the stylus."

Cassina glanced downward, and his hand clenched around the slender metal cylinder. After a moment he wrote, "What have you done to Wei?"

The words crawled like black snakes across the white screen. Spangler nodded, and the attendant turned a knob; the writing vanished.

Spangler looked thoughtfully at Cassina. The question he had been expecting was "What happened?"—meaning "What happened to me?" In the circumstances, the question was almost a certainty—probability point nine nine nine.

But Cassina had asked about Wei instead.

Grudgingly, Spangler said, "Nothing, Colonel. We weren't after Captain Wei, you know. The Rithian spy had concealed itself in his room. We couldn't warn Wei without alerting the Rithian."

Cassina stared gravely at Spangler, as if trying to decide whether he were lying. Spangler abruptly found himself gripping his knees painfully hard.

"He's all right?" Cassina scrawled.

"Perfectly," said Spangler. "Everything's all right. We've got the Rithian, and the alert is over."

Cassina drew a deep breath and let it out again. His mouth still hung idiotically slack, but his eyes smiled. He wrote, "What have you got me in this straitjacket for?"

"You were injured in the struggle. You'll be fit again in a few days. We're going to put you back to sleep now."

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Spangler motioned; the horse-faced girl pressed the hypo against Cassina's arm and pressed the trigger.

After a moment she said, "Colonel Cassina, we want you to write the numbers from one to fifty. Begin, please."

At "15" the scrawled numerals began to grow larger, less controlled; "23" was repeated twice, followed by a wild "17".

The attendant nodded. "He's under."

IT WAS long after office hours, but Spangler still sat behind his desk. He had switched off the overhead and illumination; the only light came from the reading screen in front of him. The screen showed a portion of the transcript of his interview with Cassina.

Spangler flipped over a switch and ran the spool back to the beginning. He read the opening lines again:

Q.: Can you hear me, Colonel?
A.: Yes.
Q.: I want you to answer these questions clearly, truthfully and fully to the best of your ability. When and where did you first meet Captain Wei?
A.: In Daressalam, in October, 2501.
Q.: Are you certain of that? Are you telling the truth?
A.: Yes.

Cassina's conscious mind was convinced that he had first met "Wei" twenty years ago in the African District. Several repetitions of the question failed to produce any other answer. Spangler had tried to get around the obstacle by asking for the first meeting after February 18, 2521—the date of the Rithian agents' discovery by the city patrol.

He skipped a score of lines and read:

Q.: What happened after that dinner?
A.: I invited him to my quarters. We sat and talked.
A.: What was said?
A.: (2 sec. pause) I don't remember exactly.
Q.: You are ordered to remember. What did Wei tell you?
A.: (3 sec. pause) He told me—said he was Capt. Wei, served under me in the African District from 2501 to 2507. He—
Q.: But you knew that already, didn't you?
A.: Yes. No. (2 sec. pause) I don't remember.
Q.: I will rephrase the question. Did you or did you not know prior to that evening that Wei had served under you in the African District?
A.: (3 sec. pause) No.
Q.: What else did he tell you that night?
A.: Said he had done Naval Security work. Said he had applied for transfer, to be attached to me as my aide.
Q.: Did he tell you anything else, either instructions or information, other than details of your former acquaintance or details about his transfer, that evening?
A.: No.
Q.: Skip to your next meeting. What did he tell you on that occasion?

Gradually the whole story had come out, except one point. Spangler had struck a snag when he came to the evening of the 20th, two days ago.

Q.: What did Wei tell you that evening?
A.: (4 sec. pause) I don't remember. Nothing.
Q.: You are ordered to remember. What did he tell you?
A.: (6 sec. pause: subject shows great agitation) Nothing, I tell you.
Q.: You are ordered to answer, Colonel Cassina.
A.: (subject does not reply; at end of five seconds begins to weep)
Dr. Householder: The fifteen minutes are up, Commissioner. End trnscrpt 12.52 hrs 2/22/2521.

LATER in the afternoon, after his first report to Keith-Ingram, Spangler had had another session with Cassina under the interrogation machine. He had drawn another blank, and had had to give up after five minutes because of Cassina's increasing distress. On being released from the machine, Cassina had gone into a coma and Householder declared that it would be dangerous to question him again until further notice.

Half an hour later, while he was talking to Pembun, Spangler had had a report that Cassina, still apparently unconscious, had made a strenuous effort to tear himself free of the protective collar and had gone into massive hemorrhage. He was now totally restrained, drugged, receiving continuous transfusion, and on the critical list.

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Pembun. Pembun, Pembun. There was no escaping him: no matter where your thoughts led you, Pembun popped up at the end of the trail, as if you were Alice trying to get out of the looking-glass garden.

Pembun had been right again; Pembun was always right. They had triggered some post-hypnotic command in Cassina's mind, and Cassina, twitching to the tug of that string, had done his best to kill himself.

"It seems to me," Pembun had said that afternoon, "that the main question is—*w'y* did Colonel Cassina try so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e found out you were after 'im? 'E 'ad a command to do it, of course, but w'y? Not jus' to warn the Rithch, becawse 'e didn' get enough warning that way to do 'im any good, an' besides, if it was only that, w'y did the Rithch try to kill Cassina?"

"All right," Spangler had said, keeping his voice level with difficulty. "What is your explanation, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, the Rithch mus' 'ave left some information buried in Cassina's subconscious that 'e didn' want us to find. I 'ad an idea that was it, and that's w'y I asked you not to tell Cassina the Rithch was dead—I thought 'e might 'ave been given another command, to commit suicide if the Ritchch was discovered. I think we're lucky to 'ave Colonel Cassina alive today, Commissioner; I b'lieve 'e's the most important man in the Empire right now."

"That's a trifle strong," Spangler had said. "I won't deny that this buried information, whatever it is, must be valuable. But what makes you assume that it's crucial? Presumably, it's a record of the Rithians' espionage or sabotage activities. . . ."

"Sabotage," Pembun had said quickly. "It couldn' be the other, Commissioner, because the Rithch wouldn' care that much if you found out something you already know. I b'lieve Cassina knows this: 'E knows w'ere the bombs are buried."

"Bombs!" Spangler had said after a moment. The idea was absurd. "They wouldn't be so stupid, Mr. Pembun. We have military installations on two hundred sixty planets, not to mention the fleet in space. We'd retaliate, man. It would be suicide for them to bomb us."

"You don' understand, Commissioner. They don' want to bomb Earth—if they did, there wouldn' 'ave been any need for the Rithch to leave a record of w'ere the bombs were. 'E'd simply set them with a time mechanism, and that would be that. We couldn' do a thing till after they went off. But 'e was the last one alive, an' 'e couldn' be sure 'e'd get back with 'is information, so 'e ad to leave a record. That only means one thing. The Rithi jus' want to be able to say, *'Leave us alone—or else.'*"

SPANGLER'S mind had worked furiously. It was terrifyingly possible; he could find no flaw in it. Suitably placed, a few score medium-sized disruption bombs would break a planet apart like a rotten apple. "Medium-sized" meant approximately six cubic centimeters; they would be easy to smuggle, easy to conceal, almost impossible to find. The only defense would be a radio-frequency screen over the whole planet; and if the enemy knew the precise locations of the bombs, even that defense would not work: a tight directional beam, accurately aimed, would get through and trigger the bombs. All it required was a race stubborn enough to say, "Leave us alone—or else"—and mean it. From what Pembun had said about the Rithians, they might well be such a race.

But Earth played the percentages. Earth took only calculated risks. Earth would have to succumb.

That chain of reasoning had taken only a fraction of a second. Spangler examined it, compared it with the known facts, and discarded it. He smiled.

"But, Mr. Pembun—*we've got* Cassina. It doesn't matter whether we get the information out of him or not; all we care about is that the *Rithians* aren't

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going to get it."

Pembun had looked absurdly mournful. "No—you're assuming that Cassina is the only one 'oo's got the information. I wish that was so, but I don't see 'ow it can be. Don't you see, giving it to Colonel Cassina was a mistake, becawse 'is mind is the obvious place for us to look. Now, I can see the Rithch making that mistake, deliberately, becawse it struck 'im so funny 'e couldn' resist it—but I can't see 'im making that mistake becawse 'e was stupid. I think Colonel Cassina was jus' an afterthought: 'e was feeling cocky, and 'e decided to plant the message one more time, right under your noses. I think 'e and 'is friends 'ad *already* planted it a 'undred or two 'undred times, 'owever many they 'ad time for. An' if it was me, I would 'ave picked interstellar travelers—agents for trading companies, executives who travel by spaceship a lot, visitors to Earth from other systems. I think that's w'at they did. If they did, it's practic'ly a mathematical certainty that their agents will eventually reach one of those people. You could keep up the embargo, not let anybody leave, but 'ow long would it take to process everybody 'oo might carry the message?"

"Years," Spangler had said curtly, staring at his desk-top.

"That's right. It could be done, and if you were lucky it might work. But it would kill Earth just as sure as blowing it up. . . . We've got to find out w'at Colonel Cassina knows, Commissioner. There isn' any other way."

VII

AFTER that had come the news about Cassina, almost as if it had been timed to underscore Pembun's words. Then the second and more painful interview with Keith-Ingram. Then Spangler had turned to some of the routine matters that had been filling his in-box all day, and quite suddenly it had been quitting time.

Spangler had started to leave, but had stopped at the door, turned to look at the silent, comforting walls, turned around and sat down at his desk again. Acting on an impulse he could hardly explain, he had called Joanna and begged off taking her to dinner. He had been sitting there, hardly moving, ever since.

He pressed the stud of his thumb-watch. "Eighteen eleven and one quarter."

Three hours; and he had had no dinner. There was a sickish taste in his mouth, and he felt a little light-headed, but not at all hungry.

He thumbed open the revolving front of the desk, took out a dispenser vial of pick-me-ups, and swallowed one moodily.

A vast weariness and distaste for his work and everything it implied was rising in him. He suppressed it grimly. He had known such moods before; they passed. Boredom and disgust were like the pangs of dyspepsia: you ignored them, and did your work.

It came down to this, Spangler thought slowly. They had been very nearly beaten; except for one man—Pembun—they would have been beaten. And that was all wrong.

Pembun was uncouth, ill-educated, unmannered. His methods were the merest improvisation. He had intelligence, one was forced to admit, but it was crude, untutored and undirected. But he got results.

Why?

It was possible to explain all the events of the past two days simply by saying that Pembun had happened to possess special knowledge, not available to Security, which had happened to be just the knowledge needed. But that was an evasion. The knowledge was not "special"; it was knowledge Earth should have had, and had tried to get, and had failed to get.

Again, *why?*

It seemed to Spangler that since Pembun's arrival the universe had slowly.

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almost imperceptibly turned over until it was upside down. And yet nothing had changed. Pembun was the same; so were Spangler and the rest of the world he knew.

It was a little like one of those optical illusions that you got in Primary Camouflage—a series of cubes that formed a flight of stairs going upward; and then you blinked, and the cubes were hollow, or the stairs were hanging upside down. Or like the other kind, the silhouettes of two men, with converging perspective lines at the top and bottom: you thought one man was much taller, but when you measured them you found that both were the same—or even that the one that had seemed smaller was larger than the other. . . .

Spangler swore. He had been on the point, he realized, of getting up, taking a scooter to G-level, suite 111, and asking Pembun humbly to explain to him why the sun now revolved around the Earth, black was white, and great acorns from little oak trees grew.

He picked up a memocube and flung it violently onto the desk again.

The gesture gave him no relief; the feeling of rebellion passed, depression and bewilderment remained.

Like a moth to the flame—like Mahomet to the mountain—Spangler went to Pembun.

This time the door was closed.

After the space of three heartbeats, the scooter moved off silently down the way he had come, lights winking on ahead of it in the deserted corridor and fading when it passed. It turned the corner at Upsilon and disappeared, heading for the invisible lategoer who had signaled it.

Silence.

DOWN the corridor for five meters in either direction, glareless overhead lights showed Spangler every detail of the satin-finished walls, the mathematical lines of doors and maintenance hatches, the almost invisible foottraces that, some time during the night, would be vibrated into molecular dust and then gulped by suction tubes. Beyond was nothing but darkness. Far away, a tiny dot of light flared for an instant, like a shooting star, as someone crossed the corridor.

Spangler had an instant's vision of what it would be like if the whole thing were to stop: the miles of empty corridors, the stagnant air, the darkness, the drifting dust, the slow invasion of insects. The dead weight of the Hill, bearing invisibly down upon you: terrible, insentient weight; weight of a corpse.

Spangler had forced himself into the channel of his ambition, and held himself there without deviation for ten long years. It had not been easy, with the handicap of his birth. He had remade himself with agonizing care, until he was more aristocratic than the aristocrats. He had suppressed everything that did not contribute, emphasized and nurtured everything that did. He had built, he thought, upon a rock.

And now, if that rock crumbled. . . .

Swallowing bile, he put his hand over the doorplate.

There was a long pause before the door slid open. Pembun, in underblouse and pantaloons, blinked at him as if he had been asleep. "Oh—Commissioner Spangler. Come awn in."

Spangler said roughly, "I'm disturbing you, I'm afraid. It isn't anything urgent; I'll talk with you tomorrow."

"No, please do come in, Commissioner. I'm glad you came. I was getting a little morbid, sitting 'ere by myself."

He closed the door behind Spangler. "Drink? I've still got 'alf the w'iskey left, and all the soda."

The thought of a drink made Spangler's stomach crawl. He refused it and sat down.

On the table beside the recliner were several sheets of paper and an ornate old-fashioned electropen.

"I was jus' writing a letter to my wife," Pembun said, following his glance. "Or trying to." He smiled. "I

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can't tell 'er anything important without violating security, and I know I'll prob'ly get back to Ganymede before a letter would, after the embargo is lifted, any'ow, so there rilly wasn' much sense to it. It was jus' something to do."

Spangler nodded. "It's a pity we can't let you leave the Hill. But there's an amusement section right here—cinemas, autochess, dream rooms, baths—"

Pembun shook his head, still smiling. "I wouldn' take any pleasure in those things, Commissioner."

His tone, it seemed to Spangler, was half regretful, half indulgent. No doubt they had other, more vigorous pleasures on Manhaven. Narcotics and mixed bathing would seem to them effete or incomprehensible.

Without knowing what he was about to say, he blurted, "Tell me truthfully, Pembun—do you despise us?"

Pembun's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, and his whole face subtly congealed. "I try not to," he said quietly. "It's too easy. Did you come 'ere to ask me that, Commissioner?"

Spangler leaned forward, elbows on knees, clasping his hands together, "I think I did," he said. "Forgive my rudeness, Pembun, but I really want to know. What's wrong with us, in your view? What would you change, if you could?"

Pembun said carefully, "W'at would you say was your motive for asking that, Commissioner?"

Spangler glanced up.

FROM this angle, Pembun looked more impressive. Spangler stared at him in a kind of rapture of discovery: the man's face was neither ugly nor ludicrous. The eyes were steady and alive with intelligence; the wide mouth was firm. Even the outsize ears, the heavy cheeks, only gave the face added strength and a curious dignity.

He said, "I want information. I've misjudged you grossly—and I apologize,

[*Turn page*]

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but that's not enough. I feel that there must be something wrong with my basic assumptions, with the Empire. I want to know why we failed in this Rithian affair, and you succeeded. I think you can help me, if you will."

He waited.

Pembun said slowly, "Commissioner, I think you 'ave another motive, w'ether you rillize it consciously or not. Let me tell it to you, and see if you agree. Did you ever 'ear of pecking precedence in 'ens?"

"No," said Spangler. "By the way, call me Spangler, or Thorne, won't you?"

"All right—Thorne. You can cawl me Jawj, if you like. Now, about the 'ens. Say there are twelve in a yard. If you watch them, you'll find out that they 'ave a rigid social 'ierarchy. 'En A gets to peck all the others, 'en B pecks all the others but A, C pecks all but A and B, and so on down to 'en L, 'oo gets pecked by everybody and can't peck anybody back."

"Yes," said Spangler, "I see."

Pembun went on woodenly, "You're 'en B or C in the same kind of a system. There are one or two superiors that lord it over you, and you do the same to the rest. Now, usually w'en anybody new comes into the yard, you know right away w'ether it's someone 'oo pecks you or gets pecked. But I'm a diff'rent case. I'm a diff'rent breed of 'en, and I don't rilly belong in your yard at all, so you try not to peck me excep' w'en I provoke you; it would lower your dignity. That's until you suddenly find that *I'm* pecking *you*. Now you've *got* to fit me into the system above yourself, becawse all this pecking wouldn' be endurable if you got it from both directions. So you came 'ere to say, 'I know you're 'igher in the scale than me, so it's all right. Go a'ead—peck me.'"

Spangler stared at him in silence. He was interested to observe that although he felt humiliated, the emotion was not actually unpleasant. It's a species of purge, he thought. It's good for us all to be taken down a peg now and then.

"W'at's more," Pembun said, watching him, "you injoy it. It's a pleasure to you to kowtow to somebody you think is stronger. It gives you a feeling of security. Isn' that true?"

"I won't say you're wrong," Spangler answered, trying to be honest. "I've never heard it expressed just that way before, but it's certainly true that I'm conditioned to accept and exert authority—and you're quite right, I enjoy both acts. It's a necessary state of mind in my profession, or so I've always believed. I suppose it isn't very pretty, looked at objectively."

Pembun started to reach for the whiskey decanter, then drew his hand back. He looked at Spangler with a wry smile. "W'at you don' rillize," he said, "is that I get no pleasure out of it. This may be 'ard for you to understand, but it's no fun for me to 'it a man 'oo's not trying to 'it me back. This 'ole conversation 'as been unpleasant to me, but I couldn' avoid it. You put me in a position w'ere no matter w'at I said, even if I rifused to talk to you at awl, I'd be doing w'at you wanted. And this is the funny part, Commissioner—in making me 'urt your selfesteem, you've 'urt mine twice as bad. I expec' I'll 'ave a bad taste in my mouth for days."

Spangler stood up slowly. He took two deep breaths, but his sudden anger did not subside; it grew. He said carefully, "I don't need to have a mountain fall on me. That's a quaint expression we have, Mr. Pembun—it means that one clear and studied insult is enough."

SUDDENLY Pembun was just what he had seemed in the beginning: an irritating, dirty-faced, ugly little beast of a *colonial*.

Pembun said, "You see, now you're angry. That's becawse I wouldn' play the pecking game with you."

Spangler said furiously, "Mr. Pembun, I didn't come here for insults, or for barnyard psychology either. I came to ask you for information. If you are

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so far lost to common civility—" The sentence slipped out of his grasp; he started again: "Perhaps I had better remind you that I'm empowered to *demand* your help as an official of the Empire."

Pembun said, unruffled, "I'm 'ere to 'elp if I can, Commissioner. W'at was it you wanted, exactly?"

"I asked you," said Spangler, "to tell me what, in your opinion, were the causes of Security and War Department failure in the Rithian case." As Pembun started to speak, he cut in: "Put your remarks on a spool, and have it on my desk in the morning." His voice sounded unnaturally loud in his own ears; it occurred to him with a shock that he had been shouting.

Pembun shook his head sadly, reprovingly. "I'll be glad to—if you put your request in writing, Commissioner."

Spangler clenched his jaw. "You'll get it tomorrow," he said. He turned, opened the door and strode away down the empty corridor. He did not stop to signal for a scooter until he had turned the corner, and Pembun's doorway was out of sight.

VIII

HE FOUND Joanna in the tower room, lying against a section of the couch that was elevated to form a backrest. The room was filled, choked to bursting by a male voice shouting incomprehensible syllables against a strident orchestral background. Spangler's brain struggled futilely with the words for an instant, then rejected them in disgust: the recording was one of Joanna's period collection, sung in one of the dead languages. German; full of long vowels and fruity sibilants.

She waved her hand over the control box, and the volume diminished to a bearable level. She stood up and came to meet him.

"I thought you sounded upset when you called," she said, kissing him. "Sit here. Put your feet up. Have you had anything to eat?"

"No," said Spangler. "I couldn't. I'm too tired for food."

"I'll have something up. You needn't eat it if you don't want to."

"Fine," he said with an effort.

She dialed the antique food-selector at the side of the couch, then came to sit beside him.

The voice was still shouting, but as if it were a long distance away. It rose to a crescendo, there was a dying gasp from the orchestra, a moment's pause, and then another song began.

"Why don't you have that translated?" he said irritably.

"I don't know; I rather like it as it is. Shall I turn it off?"

"That's not the point," said Spangler with controlled impatience. "You like it as it is—why? Because it's incomprehensible? Is that a sane reason?"

The food-selector's light glowed. Joanna opened the hopper, took out a tube of broth and a sandwich loaf, and put them on the table at Spangler's side.

"What are you really angry about, Thorne?" she asked quietly.

"I'll tell you," said Spangler, sitting upright. The words spilled out of him, beyond his control. "Do you think it isn't obvious to me, and to everyone else who knows you, what you're doing to yourself with this morbid obsession? Do you think it's pleasant for me to sit here and watch you wallowing in the past, like a dog in carrion, because you're afraid of anything that hasn't been safely buried for four hundred years?"

Her eyes widened with shock, and Spangler felt an answering wave of pure dark joy. This was what he had come to do, he realized, though he hadn't known it before. It was what he should have done long ago.

She blushed furiously from forehead to breast, then turned ivory-pale.

"Stop it," she said in a tight voice.

"I won't stop," Spangler said, biting the words. "Look at yourself. You're

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half-alive, half a woman. You let just enough of yourself live to do your work, and answer when you're spoken to, and respond to your lover. The rest is dead and covered with dust. I can taste it when I kiss you. How do you think I feel, wanting you, knowing that you're out of my reach—not because—"

She got up and started toward the door. Spangler reached her in one stride, flung her backward onto the couch and held her there with his whole weight.

"—not because you belong to anyone else, or ever will, but because you're too timid, too selfish, too wrapped up in yourself ever to belong to anybody?"

She struggled ineffectively. Her eyes were unfocused and glazed with tears; her whole body was trembling.

Spangler tore open her robe, pulled it away from her body. "Go ahead, look at yourself! You're a woman, a living human being, not a mummy. Why is that so hateful? Do you get any pleasure from killing yourself and everything you touch?" He shook her. "Answer me.'"

She gasped, "I can't—"

"What can't you? You can feel, you can speak, you can do anything that a normal human being can do, but you won't. You wouldn't leave that smug little shell of yours to save a life. You wouldn't leave it to save the Empire—not even to save yourself."

"Let me go."

"You're not sick, you're not afraid, you're just selfish. Cold and selfish. Everything for Joanna, and let the rest of the universe go hang!"

"Let me go."

Her trembling had stopped; she was still breathing hard, but her pale lips were firm. She raised her lids and looked at him squarely, without blinking.

Spangler raised his open right hand and struck her in the face. Her head bobbed. She looked at him incredulously, and her mouth opened.

Spangler hit her again. At the third blow, the tears started afresh. Her face crumpled suddenly and a series of short, animal sounds came out of her. At the fourth, she stopped trying to turn her head aside. Her body was limp, her eyes closed and without expression. Her sobs were as mechanical and meaningless as a fit of the hiccoughs.

Spangler rolled away from her, stood up, and went to the recliner. He felt purged and empty, listless and light. He said tonelessly, "You can get up now. I won't hit you again."

After a moment she sat up, spine curved, head hanging. When she got to her feet and turned toward the bathroom door, Spangler followed and stepped in front of her, grasping her arm.

"Listen to me," he said. "You're going to marry me, and we're going to be happy. Do you understand that?"

She looked up at him without interest.

"You fool," she said.

She stood quietly until he let her go, and then moved without haste through the doorway. The door closed behind her, and Spangler heard the lock click.

SPANGLER entered his office, as he usually did, half an hour before the official opening time. He had sat up for a long time after leaving Joanna's tower the night before, and had slept badly afterwards. This morning he had a headache which the pick-me-ups would not entirely suppress; but his mind felt cold and clear. He knew precisely what he wanted to do.

Last night's blunder was not irreparable. It was all but disastrous; it was criminally foolish; it had set him back at least six months; but it had not beaten him.

His first move would be to send her a present: something she would prize too much to reject—old paintings, or books or recordings. Very likely there would be something of the sort among the property seized by the Department in treason cases; if not, he would get it from a private collector. He had already composed the note to go with the

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gift: it was humble without servility, regretful without hope. It implied that he would not see her again; and he would not—not for at least a month.

The last three weeks of that time Spangler had allotted to grand strategy—planting rumors, certain to reach Joanna: that he was overworking; that he never smiled; that he was ill but had refused treatment. That sort of thing, details to be worked out later.

The first week was dedicated to an altogether different purpose. His ruinous outburst last night had at least had one salutary effect; it had taught Spangler that he could not fight both battles at once. Commencing today, his total energies would be aimed at one objective: to crush Pembun.

It could be done; it would be done. He had underestimated the man, but that was over. From now on, things would be different.

On his desk was a spool of summarized reports addressed to him from Keith-Ingram.

The activities of the Rithians, it seemed, had now been partially traced: eight of them, traveling together, had reached Earth as passengers aboard a second-rate tramp freighter, docking at Stambul, on the evening of February 10th. From Stambul they were known to have taken the stratosphere express to Paris, but no further trace of their movements had so far turned up until they appeared in Angels on the 18th, with one exception: the eighth Rithian had shipped out aboard a liner leaving for the Capri system on the 12th, only two days after the group had arrived. It had disembarked at Lumi, where its trail ended. Doubtless, Spangler thought, it had changed its disguise there and continued by a devious route. By now it was back in the Rithian system.

Its return before the others' was puzzling. Obviously the group had not finished its collective task, or the others would have got out too; either it had had a separate assignment, which it had completed before the others, or some single item of information had been turned up which the Rithians thought sufficiently important to send a messenger back with it immediately.

He glanced quickly through the conference schedule which Miss Timoney had made up the previous afternoon, then laid it aside and spent the rest of his half-hour in dictating notes to Pembun, Keith-Ingram and Dr. Baustian.

The note to Pembun repeated yesterday's question, word for word.

Keith-Ingram's reported the condition of Colonel Cassina and gave Pembun's analysis of the situation, without comment.

Baustian's requested him to submit, as soon as possible, a reliable procedure for identifying Rithians masquerading as human beings.

Pembun's reply popped into his in-box almost immediately; the man must have prepared it last night and held it ready for Spangler's formal request.

HE PUT the spool viciously into the screen slot and skimmed through it. It was in reasonably good Standard; so good, in fact, that Spangler conceived an instant suspicion that Pembun could speak Standard acceptably when he chose.

The document read, in part:

> In my judgment, the most serious weakness of Empire executive personnel is an excessive reliance on prescribed methods and regulations, and inadequate emphasis on original thinking and personal initiative. I am aware that this is in accord with overall policy, which would be difficult if not impossible to alter completely within the framework of the Empire, but it is my feeling that attention should be given to this problem at high policy levels, and efforts made to alter existing conditions if possible.
>
> It is not within my competence to suggest a mode of procedure, especially since the problem appears to be partly philosophical in nature. The tendency of Empire executive personnel to interpret regulations and directives in a rigid and literal manner, is in my opinion clearly related to the increasing tendency toward standardization in Home World art, manners, customs and language. In the final category, I would cite the obsolescence of all Earth language except Standard.

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and in Standard the gradual elimination of homonyms and synonyms, as well as the increasing tendency to restrict words to a single meaning, as especially significant. . . ."

Spangler removed the spool and tossed it into his "awaiting action" box. A moment later it was time for his first conference.

He had left word with Gordon to give him any message from Baustian as soon as it arrived. Forty-five minutes after the conference began, a spool popped into the in-box in front of him.

Colonel Medoc, Cassina's replacement, had been giving a long and enthusiastic account of certain difficulties encountered by the Fleet in maintaining the supra-Earth cordon, and the means by which they were being overcome. Medoc was the oldest man at the table, and fairly typical of the holdovers from the last generation but one, when, owing to the shortage of governmental and military personnel caused by the almost-disastrous Cartagellan war, standards had been regrettably lax. He was the sort of man one automatically thought of as "not quite class": his manner was a little too exuberant, his gestures too wide, his talk imprecise and larded with anachronisms.

Spangler waited patiently until he paused to shrug, then cut in smoothly: "Thank you, Colonel. Now, before we continue, will you all pardon me a moment, please?"

He slipped the spool into place and lighted the reading screen. The note read:

Baustian, G. B., BuAlPhyl
2/23/2521
Spangler, T., Dept Secur
BAP CD18053990
MS MU
Ref DS CD50347251

1— Recommended procedure for identifying members of the Rithian race masquerading as humans is as follows:
2— Make 1.7 cm. perpendicular incision, using instrument coated with paste of attached composition (Schedule A), in mid-thigh or shoulder region of subject. Reagent, in combination with Rithian body fluids, will produce brilliant purple precipitate. No reaction will take place in contact with human flesh.
3— For convenience of use, it is recommended that incision be made by agency of field-powered blade in standard grip casing, as in attached sketches. (Schedule B).
4— If desired, blade coating may also contain soporific believed to be effective in Rithian body chemistry. (Schedule C).
5— End.
Att BAP CD18053990A
BAP CD18053990B
BAP CD18053990C

Spangler smiled and cleared the screen.

"The information is satisfactory, Commissioner?" Colonel Medoc demanded brightly.

"Quite satisfactory, Colonel." Quickly, so as to give Medoc no opportunity to launch himself into his subject again, Spangler turned to Pemberton, the mayor's side. "Mr. Pemberton?"

The young man began querulously, "We don't want to seem impatient, Commissioner, but you know that our office is under considerable pressure. Now, you've given us to understand that the Rithian has already been captured and killed, and what we want to know is, how much longer. . . ."

Spangler heard him out as patiently, to all outward appearances, as if he had not heard the same complaint daily since the embargo began. He put Pemberton off smoothly but noncommittally, and adjourned the conference.

BACK in his office, Spangler finished reading Baustian's note and dictated an endorsement of paragraphs one to three. Paragraph four was a good notion, but anything with a rider like that on it would take twice as long to go through channels.

Spangler rewound the spool and set the machine to make three copies, one of which he addressed to Keith-Ingram, one to Baustian and the third to the man in charge of the fabricators assigned to Security, with an AAA priority. Then he took out Pembun's message and read it through carefully:

With regard to the assumed success of the Rithian pseudo-hypnosis against Empire agents, I would again suggest

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that the basic fault may be deeply rooted in the social complex of Earth, and in the rigid organization of Empire administration. On most of the outworlds of the writer's experience, good hypnotic subjects are in a minority, but my impression is that this is not the case on Earth, at least among Empire personnel. It may be said that a man who has successfully absorbed all the unspoken assumptions and conditioned attitudes, required of him by responsible position in the Empire, is already half hypnotized; or to put it differently, that non-suggestible minds tend to be weeded out by the systems of selection and promotion in use. For example, the addressee, Commissioner T. Spangler, is in the writer's opinion suggestible in the extreme. . . .

Spangler grinned angrily and rewound the spool.

How typical of the man that report was!—a solid gelatinous mass of naiveté surrounding one tiny thorn of shrewdness. In Pembun's place, Spangler would simply have disclaimed ability to answer the question. Since Pembun was not employed by any department concerned, the reply would have been plausible and correct; nothing more could ever have come of it.

That must have occurred to Pembun; and yet he had gone stolidly ahead to answer the question fully, and, Spangler was ready to believe, honestly. It was a damaging document; some phrases in it, particularly "within the framework of the Empire", could be interpreted as treasonable. But he had written it; and then he had slipped in that comment about Spangler.

That comment was just damaging enough to Spangler to offset the mildly damaging admissions Pembun had made about himself. Therefore Pembun had actually taken no risk at all. But why had he troubled to dictate a carefully-phrased quarter-spool to be buried in the files, when a disclaimer, in two lines, would have served? Just for "something to do"?

Spangler thought not. There was a curious coherence in Pembun's oddities: they all hung together somehow. Wincing, he forced himself to go back over the recollection of last night. There again, from the normal point of view, Pembun had given himself unnecessary difficulty. Confronted with that inconvenient question of Spangler's, "What's wrong with the Empire?" and the even more embarrassing, "Do you despise us?" any ordinary person would simply have lied.

At any rate, Pembun, by his own statement, had got no pleasure from telling the truth. What was that remark? ". . . a bad taste . . ." Never mind. What emerged from all this, Spangler thought, was the picture of a man who was compulsively, almost pathologically honest. Yes, that expressed it. His frankness was not even ethico-religious in character: it was symbolic, a *gesture*.

Spangler felt himself flushing, and his lips tightened.

The question remained: What did the man want?

He had no answer yet; but he had a feeling that he was getting closer.

IX

AT ELEVEN hours a report came from the head of the infirmary's psychiatric section: the information Security wanted from Colonel Cassina was still unavailable and in PsytSec's opinion could not be forced from him without a high probability of destroying the subject's personality. Did Spangler have the necessary priority to list Colonel Cassina as expendable?

At eleven-ten, a call came through from Keith-Ingram.

"On this Cassina affair, Thorne, what progress are you making?"

Spangler told him.

Keith-Ingram rubbed his square chin thoughtfully. "That's unfortunate," he said. "If you want my view, the Empire can spare Colonel Cassina, all right, but I'll have to go to the High Assembly for permission, and the Navy will fight it, naturally. I rather wish there were another way. Have you consulted Pembun about this?"

"The report had just come in when

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you called."

"Well, let's get this cleaned up now, if we can. Get him on a three-way, will you?"

Face stony, Spangler made the necessary connections. The image of Keith-Ingram dwindled and moved over to occupy one half of the screen. In the other half, Pembun appeared.

Keith-Ingram said, "Now, Mr. Pembun, you've helped us out of the stew right along through this affair. Have you any suggestions that might be useful in this phase of it?"

Pembun's expression was blandly attentive. He said, "My, that would be a 'ard decision to make. Let me think a minute."

Out of screen range, Spangler's fingers moved spasmodically over the control buttons at the edge of his desk.

Finally Pembun looked up. "I got one notion," he said. "It's kind of a long chance, but if it works it will get you the information you want without 'urting the Colonel. I was thinking that w'en the Rithi planted that information, they mus' 'ave given their subject some kind of a trigger stimulus to unlock the message. Now if the trigger is verbal, we 'aven' got a chance of 'itting it by accident. But it jus' now struck me that the trigger might be a situation instead of a phrase or a sentence. I mean, it might be a combination of diff'rent kinds of stimuli—a certain smell, say, plus a certain color of the light, plus a certain temperature range, and so on."

"That doesn't sound a great deal more hopeful, Mr. Pembun," Spangler put in.

"Wait," said Keith-Ingram, "I think I see what he's getting at. You mean, don't you, Mr. Pembun, that the Rithians might have used as a stimulus complex the normal conditions on their home world?"

"That's it," Pembun told him with a smile. "We can't be sure they did, of cawse, but it seems to me there's a fair chance. Any'ow, it isn' as far-fetched as it sounds, becawse those conditions would be available to the Rithi on any planet w'ere any number of them live. You wawk into a Rithch's 'ouse, an' you think you're on Sirach. They're use' to living in those vine cities of theirs, you know. They 'ate to be penned up. So w'en they 'ave to live in 'ouses, they put up vines in front of illusion screens, an' use artificial light an' scents, an' fool themselves that way."

"I see," said Keith-Ingram. "That sounds very good, Mr. Pembun; the only question that occurs to me is, can we duplicate those conditions accurately?"

"I should think so," Pembun answered. "It shouldn' be too 'ard."

"Well, I think we'll give it a trial, at any rate. What do you say, Thorne? Do you agree?"

Spangler could tell by the almost imperceptible arch of Keith-Ingram's right eyebrow, and the frozen expression of his mouth, that he knew Spangler didn't, and was enjoying the knowledge.

"Yes, by all means," said Spangler politely.

"That's settled then. I'll leave you and Thorne to work out the details. Clearing." His image faded out, leaving half the screen blank.

SPANGLER said coldly, "This is your project, Mr. Pembun, and I'll leave you entirely in charge of it. Requisition any space, materials and labor you need, and have the heads of sections call me for confirmation. I'll want reports twice daily. Are there any questions?"

"No questions, Commissioner."

"Clearing."

Spangler broke the connection, then dialed Keith-Ingram's number again. He got the "busy" response, as he expected, but left the circuit keyed in. Twenty minutes later Keith-Ingram's face appeared on the screen. "Yes, Spangler? What is it now? I'm rather busy."

Spangler said impassively, "There are two matters I wanted to discuss with you, Chief, and I thought it best not to bring them up while Pembun was on the circuit."

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"Are they urgent?"

"Quite urgent."

"All right, then, what are they?"

"First," said Spangler, "I've sent you a note on a new testing method of Baustian's, for detecting any future Rithian masqueraders. I'd like to ask you for permission to use it here in the Hill, in advance of final approval, on a provisional test basis."

"Why?"

"Just a precaution. We've found one Rithian here; I want to be perfectly sure there aren't any more."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "No harm in being sure. All right, Thorne, go ahead if you like. Now what else was there?"

"Just one thing more. I'm wondering if it wouldn't be a sound idea to open the question of Cassina's expendability anyhow, regardless of this scheme of Pembun's. If it turns out to be a frost, there'll be less delay before we can go ahead with the orthodox procedure." His stress on the word "orthodox" was delicate, but he knew Keith-Ingram had caught it.

The older man gazed silently at him for a moment. "As a matter of fact," he said, "it happens that I'd already thought of that. However, I may as well say that I have every confidence in Pembun. If all our personnel were as efficient as he is, Thorne, things would go a great deal more smoothly in this department."

Spangler said nothing.

"That's all then? Right. Clearing."

Recalling that conversation before he went to bed that night, Spangler thought, we'll see how much confidence you have in Pembun this time tomorrow.

Everything was ready by ten hours.

There was no puzzle, Spangler thought with satisfaction, without a solution. No matter how hopelessly involved and contradictory a situation might appear on the surface, or even some distance beneath it, if you kept on relentlessly, you would eventually arrive at the core, the quiet place where the elements of the problem lay exposed in their basic simplicity.

And this was the revelation that had been vouchsafed to Spangler:

The real struggle was between savagery and civilization, between magic and science, between the double meaning and the single meaning.

Pembun was on the side of ambiguity and lawlessness. Therefore he was an enemy.

What had blinded Spangler, blinded them all, was the self-evident fact that Pembun was *human*. Loyalty to a nation or an idea is conditioned; but loyalty to the race is bred in the bone. As the old saying had it, "Blood is thicker than ichor."

Pembun's humanity was self-evident; but was it a fact?

"Wei" had been a human being, too—until the moment when he was unmasked as a monster.

Pembun belonged to a world so slovenly that Rithians were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Was it not more than possible, was it not almost a tactical certainty, that given opportunity and the made-to-order usefulness of Pembun's connection with the Empire, they had at the least made him their agent?

Or, at most, replaced him with one of themselves?

THE idea was fantastic, certainly. The picture of Pembun playing the role of Rithian-killer deliberately betraying his own confederate in order to safeguard his position, was straight out of one of those wild twentieth-century romances—the kind in which the detective turned out to be the murderer, the head of the Secret Police was also the leader of the Underground, and, as often as not, the subordinate hero was a beautiful girl disguised as a boy by the clever stratagem of cutting her hair.

But that was precisely the kind of world that Pembun came from, whether he was human or Rithian; that was the unchanging essence of the ancient Unreason, beaten now on Earth but not yet stamped out of the Cosmos. That

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was the enemy.

"Ten-oh-one," said his watch. In a few moments, now, one part of the question would be answered.

He glanced at the four men in workmen's coveralls who stood by an opened section of the wall. One of them held what appeared to be a cable cutter; the others had objects that looked like testing-instruments and spare-part kits. The "cutter," underneath its camouflage shell, was an immobilizing field projector; the rest were energy weapons.

The men stood quietly, not talking, until a signal light flashed on Spangler's desk. He nodded, and they crouched nearer to the disemboweled wall, beginning a low-voiced conversation. A moment later, Pembun appeared in the doorway.

Spangler glanced up from his reading screen, frowning. "Oh, yes—Pembun," he said. "Sit down a moment, will you?" He gestured to one of the chairs along the far wall. Pembun sat, hands crossed limply in his lap, idly watching the workmen.

Spangler thumbed open the front of his desk and touched a stud; a meter needle swung over and held steady. The room was now split into two parts by a planar screen just in front of the desk. Spangler closed the microphone circuit which would carry his voice around the barrier.

The intercom glowed; Spangler put his hand over it. "Yes?"

The man said, as he had been instructed, "Commissioner, is Mr. Pembun in your office?"

"Yes, he is. Why?"

"It's that routine test, sir. You told us to give it to everybody who'd been in the Hill less than six months, and Mr. Pembun is on our list. If you're not too busy now—"

"Of course, he would be," Spangler said. "That hadn't occurred to me. All right, come in." He turned to Pembun. "You don't mind?"

"W'at is it?" Pembun asked.

"We have a new anti-Rithian test," Spangler explained easily. "We're just making absolutely certain there aren't any more Weis in the Hill. In your case, of course, it's only a formality."

Pembun's expression was hard to read, but Spangler thought he saw a trace of uneasiness there. He watched narrowly, as a white-smocked young man carrying a medical kit came in through the door to Pembun's right.

The workmen separated suddenly, and two of them started toward the door. When they had taken a few steps, one of them turned to call back to the remaining two. "You certain two UBX's will do it?"

"What's the matter, don't you think so?"

"It's up to you, but . . ." The men went on talking, while the medic approached Pembun and opened his kit. "Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes."

"Will you stand up and turn back your right sleeve, please?"

Pembun did as he was told. His upper arm was shapeless with overlaid fat and muscle, like a wrestler's. The medic placed one end of a chromed cylinder against the fleshy part of the shoulder, and pressed the release. Pembun started violently and clapped his hand to the injury. When he took it away, there was a tiny spot of blood on his palm.

The medic extruded the cylinder's narrow blade and showed it to Spangler. "Negative, Commissioner."

Spangler cleared his throat. "Naturally," he said. The medic tore off a swab from his kit and wiped Pembun's wound, then put a tiny patch of bandage on it, closed his kit and went away.

NEGATIVE, Spangler thought. Too bad; it would have been gratifying to find out that Pembun had tentacles under that blubber. But it had been a pleasure to watch him jump, anyhow. He opened his desk and cut the field circuit.

The two workmen near the door finished their discussion and left. Spangler

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said to the remaining pair, "Will you wait outside for a few minutes, please?"

When they had gone, Pembun came forward and took the seat facing the desk. "That's a rough test," he said. "'Ow does it work?"

Spangler explained. "Sorry if it was unpleasant," he added, "but I believe it's more effective than the old one."

"Well, I'm glad I passed, any'ow," said Pembun, poker-faced.

"To be sure," said Spangler. "Now—your report, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, I've 'ad a little trouble. I asked Colonel Medoc to see if 'e couldn' send somebody to Santos in the Shahpur system, to get some Rithian city-vines from the botanical gardens, there. 'E gave me to understand that you rifused the request."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," Spangler said sympathetically. "Until this question is settled, we can't very well relax the embargo, especially not for an Outworld jump."

Pembun accepted that without comment. "Another thing that 'appened, I wanted copies of any Rithi films the War Department might 'ave, in 'opes that one of them would include a sequence of a Rithch I could use to build up the illusion there was a Rithch in the room. That was rifused too; I don' know w'ether it went through your office or not."

"No, this is the first I've heard of it," Spangler lied blandly, "but I'm not surprised. War is extremely touchy about its M. S. files—I'm afraid you'd better give up hope of any help there. Can't you make do without those two items?"

Pembun nodded. "I figured I might 'ave to, so I went a'ead and did the best I could. I don' promise it will work, becawse some of it is awful makeshift, but it's ready."

Spangler felt a muscle jump in his cheek. "It's ready *now?*" he demanded.

"We'enever you like, Commissioner." Pembun got up and turned toward the door.

Spangler made an instant decision. He had not planned to take the second step against Pembun until he had manufactured a plausible opportunity, but he couldn't let Pembun's examination of Cassina proceed. He said sharply, "Just a moment!" and added, "If you don't mind."

As Pembun paused, he put out his hand to the intercom. "Ask those workmen to step in here again, will you?"

The door opened, and all four of the pseudo-workmen trooped in. Pembun looked at them with an expression of mild surprise. "'Aven' you got those UBX's *yet?*" he asked.

No one answered him, Spangler said, "I'll trouble you to come down to the interrogation rooms with me, Mr. Pembun." At his gesture, the four men moved into position around Pembun, one on either side, two behind.

"Interrogation!" said Pembun. "W'y, Commissioner?"

"Not torture, I assure you," Spangler replied, coming around the desk. "Just interrogation, There are a few questions I want to ask you."

"Commissioner Spangler," said Pembun, "am I to understand that I'm suspected of a crime?"

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler answered, "please don't be childish. Security is empowered to question anyone, anywhere, at any time, and for any reason."

FOLLOWING the initial struggle, Pembun had relaxed. He was breathing shallowly now, his eyes half open and unfocused.

"Have you got enough test patterns?" Spangler asked, using a finger-code.

"Yes, I think so, Commissioner," the young technician replied in the same manner. "His basics are very unusual, though. I may have some trouble interpreting when we get into second-orders."

"Do the best you can." He leaned forward, close to Pembun's head. "Can you still hear me, Pembun?" he said aloud.

"Yes."

"State your full name."

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"Jawj Pero Pembun."

"How long have you been an agent of the Rithians?"

A pause. "I never was."

Spangler glanced at the technician, who signaled, "Emotional content about point six."

Spangler tried again. "When and where did you last meet a Rithian before coming to Earth?"

"In April, twenty-five fourteen, at the Spring Art show in Espar, Man-'aven."

"Describe that meeting in detail."

"I was standing in the crowd, looking at a big canvas called 'Yeastley and the Tucker.' The Rithch came up and stood beside me. 'E pointed to the painting and said, 'Very amusing.' 'E was looking at the picture through a transformer, so the colors would make sense to 'im. I said, "I've seen Rithi collages that looked funnier to me.' Then 'e showed me 'ow, by changing the transformer settings, you could make it look like Yeastley 'ad a mouldy face with warts on it, and the Tucker 'ad a long tail. I said . . ."

Pembun went on stolidly to the end of the incident; he and the Rithch, whose name he had never learned, had exchanged a few more remarks and then parted.

The emotional index of his statement did not rise above point nine on a scale of five.

"Before that, when and where was your last meeting with a Rithch?"

"On the street in Espar, early in December, twenty-five thirteen."

"Describe it."

Spangler went grimly on, taking Pembun farther and farther back through innumerable casual meetings. At the end of half an hour, Pembun's breathing was uneven and his forehead was splotched with perspiration. The technician gave him a second injection. Spangler resumed the questioning.

Finally:

". . . Describe the last meeting before that."

"There was none."

Spangler sat rigid for a long moment, then abruptly clenched his fists.

HE STARED down at Pembun's tortured face. At that moment he felt himself willing to risk the forcing procedures he had planned to use on Cassina, forgetting the consequences; but there would be no profit in it. In Cassina's case, the material was there: it was only a question of applying enough force on the proper fulcrum to get it out. Here, either the material did not exist, or it was so well hidden that the most advanced Empire techniques would never find a hint of it.

But there had to be something: if not espionage, then treason.

Spangler said, "Pembun: In a war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

"The Empire."

Hoarsely: "But as between the Rithian culture and that of the Empire, which do you prefer?"

"The Rithi."

"Why?"

"Because they 'aven' ossified themselves."

"Explain that."

"They 'aven' overspecialized. They're still yuman, in a sense of the word that's more meaningful than the natural-history sense. They're alive in a way that you can't say the Empire is alive. The Empire is like a robot brain with 'alf the connections soldered shut. It can't adapt, so it's dying, but it's still big enough to be dangerous."

Spangler flicked a glance of triumph toward the technician. He said, "I will repeat, in the event of war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

Pembun said, "The Empire."

Spangler persisted angrily, "How do you justify that statement, in the face of your admission that you prefer Rithian culture to Empire culture?"

"My personal preferences aren' important. It would be bad for the 'ole yu-

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man race if the Empire cracked up too soon. The Outworlds aren' strong enough. It's too much to expect them to 'urry up and make themselves self-sufficient, w'en they can lean on the Empire through trade agreements. An' if they did, they'd 'ave to overspecialize too; they'd 'ave to subordinate everything else to building up their industrial and war potential. That would be worse than joining the Empire ag'in. The Empire 'as to be kept alive *now*. In another five centuries or so, it won' matter."

Spangler stared a question at the technician, who signaled: "Emotional content one point seven."

One seven: normal for a true statement of a profound conviciton. A falsehood, spoken against the truth-compulsion of the drug, would have generated at least 3.0.

So it had all slipped out of his hands again. Pembun's statement was damaging; it would be a black mark on his dossier: but it was not criminal. There was nothing in it to justify the interrogation: it was hardly more than Pembun had given freely in that report of his.

Spangler made one more attempt. "From the time I met you at the spaceport to the present, have you ever lied to me?"

A pause. "Yes."

"How many times?"

"Once."

Spangler leaned forward eagerly.

"Give me the details!"

"I tol' you the song, *Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting*, was 'kind of a sāga.' That was true in a way, but I said it to fool you. There's an old song with the same name, that dates from the early days on Man'aven, but that's in the old languages. W'at I sang was a modern version. It's not a folk song, or a saga, it's a political song. Old Man Pawkey is the Empire, an' the cup of cawfee is peace. 'E climbs a mounting, and 'e wears 'imself out, and 'e fights a 'undred battles, and 'e lets 'is farm go to forest, jus to get a cup of cawfee—instead of growing the bean in 'is own back yard."

A wave of anger towered and broke over Spangler. When it passed, he found himself standing beside the interrogation table, legs spread and shoulders hunched. There was a stinging pain in the knuckles of his right hand; and there was a dark-red blotch oozing a bright drop on Pembun's lip.

The technician was staring at him, but he looked away when Spangler turned.

"Bring him out of it and then let him go," Spangler said, and strode out of the room.

THE screen filled one wall of the chamber, so that the three-dimensional orthocolor image appeared to be physically present beyond a wall of vitrin.

Spangler sat a little to right of center, with Gordon at his left. To his right was Colonel Medoc with his aide; at the far left, sitting a little apart from the others, was Pembun.

Spangler had spoken to Pembun as little as possible since the interrogation; to be in the same room with him was almost physically distasteful.

On the ancillary screen before Spangler, Keith-Ingram's broad grey face was mirrored. The circuit was not two-way, however; Keith-Ingram was receiving the same tight-beam image that appeared on the big wall screen, and so were several heads of other departments and at least one High Assembly member.

The pictured room did not look like a room at all: it looked almost exactly like the Rithian garden-city Spangler had seen in the indoctrination film. There were the bluish light, the broad-leaved green vines and the serpentine blossoms, with the vague feeling of space beyond; and there, supported by a crotch of the vine, was a Rithian.

The reconstruction was uncannily good, Spangler admitted; if he had not seen the model at close hand, he would have believed the thing to be alive.

But something was subtly off-key; some quality of the light, or configura-

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tion of the vine stalks, or perhaps even the attitude of the lifelike Rithian simulacrum. The room as a whole was like a museum diorama convincing only after you had voluntarily taken the first step toward belief.

Medoc was chatting noisily with his aide: his way of minimizing tension, evidently. The aide nodded and coughed nervously. Gordon shifted his position in the heavily-padded seat, and subsided guiltily when Spangler glanced at him.

Keith-Ingram's lips moved soundlessly; he was talking to one of the high executives on another circuit. Then the sound cut in and he said, "All ready at this end, Spangler. Go ahead."

"Right, sir." Distastefully, Spangler turned his head toward Pembun. "Mr. Pembun?"

Pembun spoke quietly into his intercom. A moment later, the vines at the left side of the room parted and Cassina stepped into view.

His face was pale and he looked acutely uncomfortable. Under forced healing techniques he had made a good recovery, but he still looked unwell. He glanced down at the interlaced vines that concealed the true floor, took two steps forward, turned to face the motionless Rithian, and assumed the "at ease" position, hands behind his back. His stiff face eloquently expressed disapproval and discomfort.

No one in the viewing room moved or seemed to breathe. Even the restless Medoc sat statue-still, gazing intently at the screen.

How does Cassina feel, Spangler wondered irrelevantly, with a bomb inside his skull?

Medoc had set his watch to announce seconds. The tiny ticks were distinctly audible.

Three seconds went by, and nothing happened. Presumably, if the buried message in Cassina's brain were triggered by the situation, the buried material would come out verbally, with compulsive force.

Four seconds.

Pembun bent forward over his intercom and murmured. In the room of the image, the Rithian dummy moved slightly; tentacles gripped and relaxed, shifting its weight minutely; the head turned. A high-pitched voice, apparently coming from the dummy, said, "Enter and be at peace."

Six seconds.

The watch ticked once more; then the dummy spoke again, in the sibilants and harsh fricatives of the Rithian language.

Nine seconds. Ten. The dummy spoke once more in Rithian.

Twelve seconds.

The dummy said in Standard, "You will take some refreshment?"

Cassina's expression did not change; his lips remained shut.

Pembun sighed. "It's no use going on," he said. "I'm afraid it's a failure."

"No luck, Chief," said Spangler. "Pembun says that's all he can do."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Very well. I'll contact you later. Clearing." His screen went blank.

Pembun was speaking into the intercom. A moment later a voice from behind the vines called, "That's all, Colonel." Cassina turned and walked stiffly out. "Clearing," said the voice; and the big screen faded to silvery blankness.

Spangler sat still, savoring his one victory, while the others stood up and moved murmuring toward the door. Vines, he thought mockingly. Dummy monsters. Smells!

WHEN they tried it the next time, it was very different. Cassina lay clipped and swathed in the interrogation harness. His glittering eyes stared with an expression of frozen terror at the ceiling.

Spangler, at the bedside, was only partly conscious of the other men in the room and of the avid bank of vision cameras. He watched Cassina as one who marks the oily ripples of the ocean's

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surface, knowing that fathoms under, a titanic submarine battle is being fought.

In the submerged depths of Cassina's mind, a three-sided struggle had been going on for more than half an hour without a respite. The field of battle centered around a locked and sealed compartment of Cassina's memory. The three combatants were the interrogation machine, the repressive complex which guarded the sealed memory, and Cassina's own desperate will to survive.

The dynamics of the battle were simple and deadly. First, through normal interrogation, Cassina's attention had been directed to the memory-sector in question. The pattern of that avenue of thought was reproduced in the interrogation machine—its jagged outline performed an endless, shuddering dance in the scope—and fed back rhythmically into Cassina's brain, so that his consciousness was redirected, like a compass needle to a magnet, each time it tried to escape. This technique, without the addition of truth drugs or suggestion, was commonly used to recover material suppressed by neurosis or psychic trauma; the interval between surges of current was so timed that stray bits of the buried memory would be forced out by the repressive mechanism itself—each successive return of attention, therefore, found more of the concealed matter exposed, and complete recall could usually be forced in a matter of seconds.

In Cassina's case, the repressive complex was so strong that these ejected fragments of memory were being reabsorbed almost as fast as they were emitted. The repression was survival-linked, meaning to say that the unreasoning, magical nine-tenths of Cassina's mind was utterly convinced that to give up the buried material was to die. Therefore the battle was being fought two against one: the repressive complex, plus the will to survive, against the interrogation machine.

The machine had two aids: the drugs in Cassina's system, and the tireless, pitiless mechanical voice in his ears: *"Tell! . . . Tell! . . . Tell! . . . Tell! . . .*

And the power of the machine, unlike that of Cassina's mind, was unlimited.

Cassina's lips worked soundlessly for an instant; then his expression froze again. Spangler waited for another few seconds, and nodded to the technician.

The technician moved his rheostat over another notch.

Seventy times a second, blasting down Cassina's feeble resistance, the feedback current swung his mind back to a single polarity. Cassina could not even escape into insanity, while that circuit was open; there was no room in his mind for any thought but the one, amplified to a mental scream, that tore through his head with each cycle of the current.

The repression complex and the will to survive were constants; the artificial compulsion to remember was a variable.

Spangler nodded again; up went the power.

XI

CASSINA'S waxen face was shiny with sweat, and so contorted that it was no longer recognizable. Abruptly his eyes closed, and the muscles of his face went slack. The technician darted a glance to one of the dials on his control board, and slammed over a lever. Two signal lights began to flash alternately; Cassina's heart, which had stopped, was being artificially controlled.

An attendant gave Cassina an injection. In a few moments his face contorted again, and his eyes blinked open.

The silence in the room was absolute. Spangler waited while long minutes ticked away, then nodded to the technician again. The power went up. Again: another notch.

Without warning, Cassina's eyes screwed themselves shut, his jaws distended, and he spoke: a single, formless stream of syllables.

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Then his face froze into an icy, indifferent mask. The signal lights continued to flash until the technician, with a tentative gesture, cut the heart-stimulating current; then the steady ticking of the indicator showed that Cassina's heart was continuing to beat on its own. But his face might have been that of a corpse.

Spangler felt his body relax in a release of tension that was almost painful. His fingers trembled. At his nod, the technician cut his master switch and the attendant began removing the harness from Cassina's head and body.

Spangler glanced once at the small vision screen that showed Keith-Ingram's intent face, then took the spool the technician handed him, inserted it into the playback in front of him, and ran it through again and again, first at normal speed, then slowed down so that individual words and syllables could be sorted out.

Cassina had shouted, "You will forget what I am about to tell you and will only remember and repeat the message when you see a Rithian and smell this exact odor. If anyone else tries to make you remember, you will die. *Vuyown fowkip tiima yodg pirup* pet shop *vuyown geckyg odowo coyowod, cpgnvib btui tene* book store *ikpyu. Nobcyeu kivpi cyour myoc. Aoprosu* . . .

There was much more of it, all in outlandish syllables except that "pet shop" was repeated once more. The others crowded around, careful only not to obstruct Keith-Ingram's view, while Spangler, pointedly ignoring Pembun, turned the spool over to Heissler, the rabbity little Rithian expert who had been flown in early that morning from Denver.

Heissler listened to the spool once more, made hieroglyphic notes, frowned, and cleared his throat. "This is what it says, *roughly,*" he began. "I don't want to commit myself to an exact translation until I've had time to study the text *thoroughly.*" He glanced around, then looked down at his notes.

"On the map we sent you by Kreth Gana you will find a pet shop on a north-south avenue, with a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. The first bomb is at this location. The others will be found as follows: from the first location through the outermost projection of the adjacent coastline—" Heissler paused. "A distance, in Rithian terminology, which is roughly equal to six thousand seven hundred kilometers. I'll work it out exactly in a moment . . . it comes to six seven six eight kilometers, three hundred twenty-nine meters and some odd centimeters—to the second location, which is also a pet shop. From this location, at an interior angle of—let's see, that would be eighty-seven degrees, about eight minutes—yes, eight minutes, six seconds—here's another distance, which works out to . . .ah, nine thousand three hundred seventy-two kilometers, one meter—to the third location. From this location, at an exterior angle of ninety-three degrees, twenty minutes, two seconds . . ."

SPANGLER had palmed his intercom, got Miss Timoney, and directed her: "Get street maps of all major North American cities and put all the available staff to work on them, starting with those over five million. They are to look for a pet shop—that's right, a *pet shop*—on a north-south avenue, which has a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. This project is to be set up as temporary but has triple-A priority. In the meantime, rough out a replacement project to cover all inhabited areas in this hemisphere, staff to be adequate to finish the task in not over forty-eight hours—and have the outline on my desk for approval when I come back to the office."

". . . seven thousand nine hundred eighty-one kilometers, ninety-eight meters, to the fifth location. Message ends." Heissler folded his hands and sat back.

Spangler glanced at Keith-Ingram. The grey man nodded. "Good work, Thorne! Keep that project of yours mov-

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ing, and I'll see to it that similar ones are set up in the other Districts. Congratulations to you all. Clearing." His screen faded.

. . . And that was it, Spangler thought. Undoubtedly there were millions of pet shops in the world which had a restaurant on one side and a book store on the other, and were on north-south avenues; but there couldn't be many pairs of them on a line whose exact length was known, and which passed through the salient point of a coastline adjacent to the first. It was just the sort of mammoth problem with which the Empire was superlatively equipped to deal. Within two days, the bombs would have been found and deactivated.

Curiously, it was not his inevitable promotion which occupied Spangler's mind at that moment, not even the certainty that the Empire's most terrible danger had been averted. He was thinking about Pembun.

In more ways than one, he thought, this is the victory of reason over sentiment, science over witchcraft. *This is the historic triumph of the single meaning.*

He glanced at Pembun, still sitting by himself at the end of the room. The little man's face was grey under the brown. He was hunched over, staring at nothing.

Spangler watched him, feeling the void inside himself where triumph should have been. It was always like this, after he had won. So long as the fight lasted, Spangler was a vessel of hatred; when it was over, when his emotions had done their work, they flowed out of him and left him at peace. Sometimes it was difficult to remember how he could have thought the defeated enemy so important, how he could have burned with impotent rage at the very existence of a man so small, so shriveled, so obviously harmless. Sometimes, as now, Spangler felt the intrusive touch of compassion.

It's how we're made, he thought. The next objective is always the important thing the only thing that exists for us . . . and then, when we've reached it, we wonder why it was so necessary, and sometimes we don't know quite what to do with it. But there's always something else to fight for. It may be childish, but it's the thing that makes us great.

Pembun stood up slowly and walked over to Colonel Medoc who was talking ebulliently to Gordon. Spangler saw Medoc turn and listen to something Pembun was saying; then his brows arched roguishly and he shook his head, putting a finger to his pursed lips. Pembun spoke again, and Medoc grinned hugely, leaned over and whispered something into Pembun's ear, then shouted with laughter.

Pembun walked out of the room, glancing at Spangler as he passed. His face was still grey, but there was a faint, twisted smile on his lips.

He's made a joke, Spangler thought. Give him credit for courage.

He felt suddenly listless, as he had been after the scene with Joanna. He moved toward the door, but a sudden tingling of uneasiness made him hesitate. He turned after a moment and walked over to Medoc.

"Pardon my curiosity, Colonel," he said. "What was it that Pembun said to you just now?"

Medoc's eyes glistened. "He was very droll. He asked me if I knew any French, and I said yes—I spoke it as a boy, you know; my family summered in a very backward, very picturesque area. Well, then he asked me if it was not true that in French, 'pet shop' would have an entirely different meaning than in Standard." He snickered.

"And you told him—?" Spangler prompted.

Medoc made one of his extravagant gestures. "I said yes! That is, if you take the first word to be French, and the second to be Standard, then a pet shop would be—" he lowered his voice to a dramatic undertone—"a shop that sold impolite noises."

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He laughed immoderately, shaking his head. "What a thing to think of!"

Spangler smiled wryly. "Thank you, Colonel," he said, and walked out. That touch of uneasiness had been merely a hangover, he thought; it was no longer necessary to worry about anything that Pembun said, or thought, or did.

Pembun was waiting for him in his outer office.

Spangler looked at him without surprise, and crossed the room to sit beside him. "Yes, Mr. Pembun?" he said simply.

"I 'ave something to tell you," said Pembun, "that you won't like to 'ear. Per'aps we'd better go inside."

"All right," said Spangler, and led the way.

HE FOUND himself walking along a deserted corridor somewhere on the recreation level. On one side, the doorways he passed beckoned him with stereos of the tri-D's to be experienced inside—a polar expedition on Nereus VI, an evening with Ayesha O'Shaughnessy, a nightmare, a pantomime, a ballet, a battle in space. On the other, he glimpsed the pale, crystalline shells of empty dream capsules.

He did not know how long he had been walking. He had boarded a scooter, he remembered, but he did not know which direction he had taken, or how long he had ridden, or where he had got off. His feet ached, so he must have been walking quite a long time.

He glanced upward. The ceiling of the corridor was stereo-celled, and the view that was turned on now was that of the night sky: a clear, cold night, by the look of it: a sky of deep jet, each star as brilliant and sharp as a kernel of ice.

Pembun's grey-brown face stared back at him from the sky. He had been watching that face ever since he had left his office; he had seen it against the satin-polished walls of corridors; it was there when he closed his eyes; but it looked singularly appropriate against this background. The stars have Pembun's face, he thought.

A bone-deep shudder passed through his body. He turned aside and went into one of the dream rooms, and sat down on the robing bench.

The door closed obsequiously behind him.

He looked down into the open capsule, softly padded and just big enough for a man to lie snugly; he dented its midnight-blue lining with his finger. The crystal curve of the top was like ice carved paper-thin; the gas vents were lipped by circlets of rose-tinted metal, antiseptically bright.

No, he thought. At least, not yet. I've got to think. Now of all times, I've got to think.

A pun, a pun, a beastly, moronic pun. . . . .

Pembun had said, "I've made a bad mistake, Commissioner. You remember me asking w'y Colonel Cassina tried so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e saw we'd found 'im out?"

And Spangler, puzzled, uneasy: "I remember."

"An' I answered myself, that Cassina mus' 'ave been ordered to do it so 'e could be killed—becawse of the message in 'is brain that the Rithch wouldn' want us to find."

"You were right, Mr. Pembun."

"No, I was wrong. I ought to 'ave seen it. We know that the Rithch's post-'ypnotic control over Cassina was strong enough to make 'im try to commit suicide; 'e almost succeeded later on, even though we 'ad 'im under close surveillance and were ready for it. So it wouldn' 'ave made any sense for the Rithch to order 'im to come and be killed. If Cassina 'ad tried to kill *'imself*, right then, the minute you came into the office, there isn't any doubt that 'e would 'ave been able to do it. You never could 'ave stopped 'im in time."

Spangler's brain had clung to that unanswerable syllogism, and gone around and around with it, and come out nowhere. "What are you getting at?"

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"Don't you see, Commissioner? W'at the Rithch rilly wanted was w'at actually 'appened. 'E wanted us to kill *'im*—becawse it was in 'is brain, not in Cassina's, that the rilly dangerous information was."

Pembun had paused. Then: "They love life. 'E couldn' bring 'imself to do it, but 'e could arrange it so that we'd 'ave to kill 'im, not take 'im alive."

And Spangler, hoarsely: "Are you saying that that message we got from Cassina was a fraud?"

"No. It might be, but I don't think so. I think the Rithch left the genuine message in Cassina's mind, all right, for a joke—and becawse 'e knew that even if we found it, it wouldn' do us any good."

Spangler had hardly recognized his own voice. "I don't understand you. What are you trying to—what do you mean, it wouldn't do us any good?"

No triumph in Pembun's voice, only weariness and regret: "I told you you wouldn' like it, Commissioner. Did you notice there were two Standard phrases in that message?"

"Pet shop and book store. Well?"

"You can say the same things in Rochtik—*brutu ka* and *lessi ka*. They're exact translations; there wouldn' 'ave been any danger of confusion at awl."

SPANGLER had stared at him, silently, for a long moment. Inside him, he had felt as if the solid earth had fallen away beneath him, all but a slender pinnacle on which he sat perched; as if he had to be very careful not to make any sudden motion, lest he slip and tumble down the precipice topped by the pinnacle.

"Did you know," he asked brittlely, "that I would ask Colonel Medoc what you had said to him?"

Pembun nodded slowly. "I thought you might. I thought per'aps it would prepare you, a little. This isn' easy to take."

"What are you waiting for?" Spangler had managed. "Tell me the rest."

"Awl right. . . . *Pet* 'appens to be a sound that's used in a good many yuman languages. In Late Terran French it 'as an impolite meaning. But in Twalaz, w'ich is derived from French, it means 'treasure,' and a pet shop would be w'at you cawl in Standard a jewelry store.

"Then there's Kah-rin, w'ich is the trade language in the Goren system and some others. In Kah-rin, *pet* means a toupee. And as for 'book store,' *book* means 'machine' in Yessuese, 'carpet' in Elda, 'toy' in Balaut—and *bukstor* means 'public urinal' in Perroschi. Those are just a few that I 'appen to know; there's prob'ly a 'undred others that I never 'eard of.

"Prob'ly the Rithi agreed on w'at language or dialect to use before they came 'ere. It's the kind of thing that would amuse them . . . I'm sorry. I told you they liked puns, Commissioner . . . and you know that Earth is the only yuman planet w'ere the language 'asn't evolved to speak of in the last four 'undred years."

NOW he understood why Pembun's face was grey: not because Spangler had defeated him in a contest of wills—but because the Empire had had its death-blow.

The Rithians had planned their joke well; they had left a clear message for their enemies, saying, "Here are the bombs"—but the message could never be read.

Now Earth's campaign against the Rithians would stop. There would be no check to that alien growth; wherever Man turned, he would find the friendly, pleasure-loving, humorous Rithians. . . . And if other alien empires rose, might not the Rithians send word to say with authority, "Leave our friends alone, too"?

. . . So that somehow, without quite knowing how it had happened, Earth would find that the crest of the wave had passed it by; that it was settling into the trough of history.

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XII

NIGHT upon night, deep after endless deep; distance without perspective, relation without order: the universe without the Empire.

One candle, that they had thought would burn forever, now snuffed out and smoking thinly in the darkness.

Another deep shudder racked Spangler's body. Blindly, he crawled into the capsule and closed it over him.

After a long time, he opened his eyes and saw two blurred faces above him. The light hurt his eyes. He blinked until he could see them clearly: one was Pembun and the other was Joanna.

"'Ow long 'as 'e been in there?" Pembun's voice said.

"I don't know, there must be something wrong with the machine. The dials aren't registering at all." Joanna's voice, but sounding as he had never heard it before. "If the shutoff didn't work—"

"Better cawl a doctor."

"Yes." Joanna's head turned aside and vanished.

"Wait," Spangler said thickly. He struggled to sit up.

Joanna's face reappeared, and both of them stared in at him, as if he were a specimen that had astonishingly come to life. It made Spangler want to laugh.

"Security," he said. "Security has two meanings. I was living a pun, and didn't know it. What do you think of that?"

Joanna choked and turned away. After a moment Spangler realized that she was crying. He shook his head violently to clear it and started to climb out of the capsule. Pembun put a hand on his arm.

"Can you 'ear me, Thorne?" he said anxiously. "Do you understand w'at I'm saying?"

"I'm all right," said Spangler, standing up. "Joanna, what's the matter with you?"

She turned. "You're not—"

"I'm all right. I was tired, and I crawled in there to rest. I stayed there, thinking, for an hour or so. Then I must have fallen asleep."

She took one step and was pressed tight against him, her cheek against his throat, her arms clutching him fiercely.

"You were gone six hours," Pembun said. "I got Miss Planter's name from your emergency listing, and we've been looking for you ever since. I shouldn' 'ave jumped to conclusions, I guess." He turned to go.

"Wait," said Spangler again. He felt weak, but very clear and confident. He had done a lot of thinking, before he fell asleep. There had been time to recast his whole life, to turn it and look at it from new angles, to see meanings that had been hidden from him before. He knew the answer to Pembun, now.

Joanna pulled away from him abruptly and began hunting for a tissue. Spangler got one out of his pouch and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said in a small voice, and sat down on the bench.

"This is for you, too, Joanna," said Spangler soberly. "Part of it." He turned to Pembun.

"You were wrong," he said clearly.

Pembun's face slowly took on a resigned expression. "'Ow?"

"You told me, under interrogation, that your only reason for working with the Empire, against its rivals, was that the Empire was necessary to the Outworlds—that if it broke up too soon, the Outworlds would either fall with it, or else become as 'ossified' as the Empire itself, which would be equally bad."

"If you say so, I'll take your word for it, Commissioner."

"You said it. Do you deny it now?"

"No."

"You were wrong. You've given your life to work that must have been distasteful to you, every minute of it." He draw a deep breath. "I can't imagine why, unless you were reasoning on the basis of two assumptions that any twenty-first-century schoolboy could have disproved—that like causes invariably produce like results, and that the end

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justifies the means."

Pembun's expression had changed from boredom to surprise, to shock, to incredulous surmise. Now he looked at Spangler as if he had never seen him before.

"Go awn," he said softly.

"Instead of staying on Manhaven, where you belonged, you've been bumbling around the Empire, trying to hold together a structure that needed only one push in the right place to bring it down. . . . You've been as wrong as I have. Both of us have been wasting our lives.

"Now see what's happened! Earth is finished as a major power. The Empire is dead this minute, though it may not begin to stink for another century. The Outworlds have *got* to stand alone. If like measures produce like ends, then that's the way it will be, whether you like it or not—but history never repeats itself, Pembun."

"Jawj," said the little man.

"Jawj . . . Incidentally, I know you dislike apologies—"

"You don't owe me any," said Pembun. They smiled at each other for a moment; then Spangler thrust out his hand and Pembun took it.

"Thorne, what are you going to do?" Joanna asked.

He looked at her.

"Resign tomorrow, get a visa as soon as I can, and ship out. If I can find a place that will take me."

"There's a place for you on Man-'aven," said Pembun. "If there isn't, we'll make one."

JOANNA looked from one to the other, and said nothing.

"Jawj," said Spangler, "wait for us outside a few minutes, will you?"

The little man smiled happily, sketched a bow, and walked out. His voice floated back:

"I'll be with Miss O'Shaughnessy w'en you want me."

Spangler sat down beside Joanna. She looked at him with an expression in which bewilderment and pain were mingled with something else, harder to define.

"Miss O'Shaughnessy?" she asked tentatively.

"One of the tri-D's across the corridor. I wonder if he has any idea of what he's getting into." He paused. It had been easy, with Pembun; nothing had ever been easier to say. This was harder.

"I have something else to tell you, Joanna," he began.

"Thorne, if it's an apology—"

"It isn't. If Pembun told you anything about the last few days, then perhaps you know part of the reason for—what I did."

"Yes."

"But that's nothing. I may beat you again; I doubt if I'll ever apologize for it. What I have to tell you is that I made up my mind to marry you, three months ago . . . not because you're Joanna . . . but because you're a Planter."

"I knew that."

Spangler stared at her.

"You what?"

"Why else do you think I wouldn't?" she demanded, meeting his gaze.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glittering with the last tears. The aloof, icy mask was gone. She looked, Spangler discovered, nothing whatever like a statue of Aristocracy.

His throat ached, and the words came out harshly. "Will you come with me?"

She looked at her hands. "If I were to say no, would you go without me?"

". . . Yes," said Spangler. "I've got a lot to do, and a lot to make up for. Thirty years. I can't do it here."

Her eyes met his again, and he felt her fingers touch him lightly. "In that case," she said thoughtfully, "you'll have to persuade me, won't you? It may take a long time."

Spangler gripped her arms. "The trip to Manhaven takes five weeks, I believe. We could make a good beginning then."

"Yes," said Joanna, "we could."

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The Boy with FIVE FINGERS

By JAMES E. GUNN

Everybody's different—but some are more different than others

I LOVE Miss Harrison. The other boys laugh at me and say that Miss Davis is prettier or Miss Spencer is nicer. But I don't care. I love Miss Harrison.

Miss Harrison's my teacher. When I grow up we're going to get married. When I tell her that she gets that kind of crinkling around her eye like she does when she's pleased about something, and she says that's fine like she meant it, and I guess she does.

The first time I thought about it was the day Miss Harrison told us about the scientists and the Old Race and the Basic Right. Miss Harrison said we should try to keep track of what the scientists are doing because they are the wisest and maybe if we know more about them we will be wiser, too, and might even be scientists ourselves some day. But I think what she really wanted to talk about was the Basic Right. Somehow, everyday, she talks about the Basic Right and it must be important because she talks about it so much.

So Miss Harrison said that many, many years ago, before any of us were born, the scientists had uncovered ruins and nobody knew what they were and everybody wondered and thought about them because they were really big.

Somebody said that we had built them long ago and left them and forgotten about them but nobody believed that be-

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cause we live in little houses far apart and we never had built anything as big as the ruins and never had wanted to build anything like that.

Then somebody else said that the ruins had been built by a race that lived on Earth before we did and had died or something because maybe conditions got different or maybe they went to live on another planet. And everybody said that must be right, so they started calling them the Old Race but nobody knew what they looked like, or did, or anything except that they built these huge places and then went away.

Nobody knew any more than that for years and years, Miss Harrison said, until just a year or so ago when the scientists dug up a place that wasn't all in ruins and found statues and pictures and books and everything. So everybody was all excited and worked on them awfully hard until they could tell what the Old Race was like and just about what was in the books.

Miss Harrison kind of stopped here and looked at us like she does when she's going to tell us something important and we should all get real quiet and listen carefully so we wouldn't miss anything.

Then she said that they had just released the news and the Old Race wasn't really different after all but sort of like ancestors of ours only far away. She said that in lots of ways they were like us only strange and did strange things, and she said we should be sorry for them and glad, too, because maybe if they hadn't been strange we wouldn't be here. Then she told us how strange they were, and I was glad I didn't live then and that I was living now and I was in Miss Harrison's class and listening to her tell us about the Old Race.

MOST all of them lived together in these big places, she said, like ants in an ant heap. Everybody gasped at that because we all liked lots of room. But the strangest thing of all, Miss Harrison said, was something else. She stopped again and we all got real quiet. They were all, she said slowly, exactly alike.

Nobody said anything for a moment and then Willie began to laugh the way he does, sort of half-hissing, and pretty soon we were all laughing and Miss Harrison, too. They all had two eyes, she said, and one nose, and one mouth, and two ears, and two arms, and two legs. After every one of those things Willie began hissing again and we all had to laugh. And, Miss Harrison said, they were all stuck in exactly the same place. Their arms and legs all had bones in them that had joints in the middle and at each end.

Though they were all exactly alike, Miss Harrison said, they thought they could see differences and because of this they did all sorts of strange things until they did the strangest thing of all and ruined all their big places and their children weren't all alike any more. So it went on like that until nobody was alike and here we are. So they were kind of ancestors, like Miss Harrison said.

Then Miss Harrison stopped again and got up slow, the way she does when she wants to make sure everybody will pay attention. We all held our breath. In this room, she said, right now, we have a member of the Old Race.

Everybody let out his breath all at once. We all looked at her but she laughed and said no, she wasn't it. Johnny, she said, stand up, and I stood up. There, said Miss Harrison, is what the Old Race looked like. Everybody stared at me and I felt kind of cold and lonely all at once. Of course, she said, I don't mean Johnny is really one of the Old Race but he looks just like they used to and he even has five fingers on each hand.

All at once I felt ashamed. I put my hands behind me where nobody could see.

Willie started hissing again, but he wasn't laughing now and his thin forked tongue was flickering at me. Everybody moved as far away from me as they could get and started making nasty sounds. If I had been a little younger I

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might have started to cry, but I just stood there and wished I had a mouth and tongue like Willie's, or a cart like Louise's instead of legs, or arms like Joan's or fingers like Mike's.

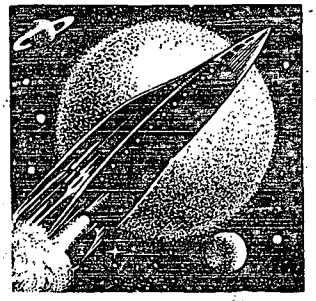
But Miss Harrison stood up straight and frowned, like she does when she's real mad about something and she said she was very surprised and it would seem like everything she'd said had been wasted. Pretty soon everybody quieted down and listened so she wouldn't be mad and she said it looked like what she'd said about the Basic Right hadn't done one bit of good.

Everybody has a right to be different, that was the Basic Right, she said, the foundation of everything and we wouldn't be here now if it weren't for that. And the law says that no one shall discriminate against anyone else because they are different, and that applied to being the same, too. And Miss Harrison said a lot more things I don't remember because I was sort of excited and warm inside. And finally she said she hoped we'd learned a lesson because the Old Race hadn't, and look where they were.

It was right after that I decided I loved Miss Harrison. The other boys say she should have a neck, like Miss Davis, but I don't see why. They say she should have two eyes like me or three like Miss Spencer, but I like her just the way she is and everything she does, like the way she wraps her arm around the chalk when she draws on the board. But I've already said it. I love Miss Harrison.

When I grow up we're going to get married. I've thought of lots of reasons why we should but there's one that's better than any of them.

Miss Harrison and me—I guess we're more different than anybody.



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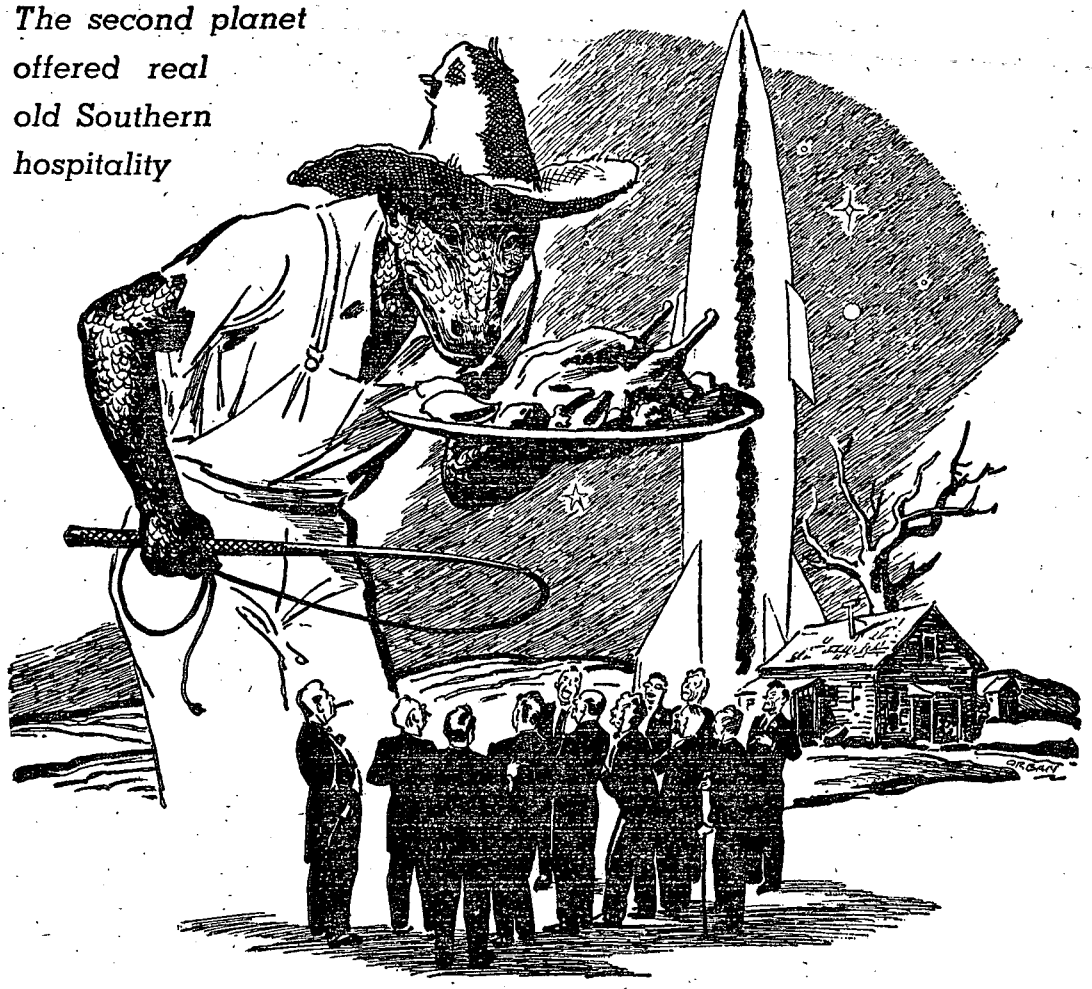
The second planet offered real old Southern hospitality



My Old Venusian Home

IT WAS cold and blustering, that day in January 2076, when Edward Hale Thompson was inaugurated as the fifty-ninth president of the United States of America. Video cameras from all over the world were aimed at the spot where Chief Justice Hellman administered the inaugural oath. Representatives of thirty-nine of the fifty-one states manfully turned down their coat collars so as not to hide their faces as they stepped forward to shake hands with the new president.

The remaining twelve delegates sat grimly about a table, far from Washington, D. C., in the home of Senator James Beauregarde. The Senator's house was one of the show places in Atlanta, Georgia, still looking as it had when first built by his great-grandfather. The

By KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

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twelve men were silent, watching the face of the old-fashioned clock in the hallway. The minute hand reached the top of the clock and the men turned to look at each other.

"I guess they're swearing him in now," one of the men said. The harshness of his voice deadened the soft southern drawl. "Well, gentlemen, we've finally got a Negro for president."

Senator Beauregarde reached for the decanter in the center of the table and poured himself a drink. He studied the amber fluid while the others helped themselves.

"This might be the proper time," the senator said, "to offer a toast. Gentlemen, I give you the—New Confederate States of America!"

"By Heaven, suh, I'll drink to that," one of the men exclaimed.

They all drank.

"Gentlemen," Senator Beauregarde said again, "I asked you all to meet here because each of you represents a state which refused to take part in the shameful program of putting a colored man in the White House. I believe, gentlemen, that the time has come when we must act."

The senator paused and looked around the table, his hand sweeping through his white mane in the gesture so well known in the halls of the senate. "Around this table in front of me," he said, his voice throbbing with emotion, "I see men who bear names long famous in these historic Southern states—Longstreet, Jackson, Hood, Stuart, Bragg, Howard, Rutherford, Todhunter—names which have produced the flower of Southern manhood for three hundred years—a manhood now about to be trampled beneath the feet of a blackamoor."

"And you suggest secession, suh?"

SENATOR BEAUREGARDE waited an impressive half minute. "I believe," he said, "that it is time for the words of Jefferson Davis, spoken on that historic day of February 18th, 1861, to ring out over these fair states once more. May I remind you, gentlemen: 'It was the wanton aggression on the part of others that justified the action of the Southern people. We have vainly endeavored to secure tranquility and obtain respect for the rights to which we are entitled. As a necessity, not a choice, we have resorted to the remedy of separation.' Those words, gentlemen, are just as true today as they were the day Jefferson Davis first spoke them."

"The senator's right," one of the other men said. "I reckon none of us can stand the idea of having a Negro for president."

"We all agree with you, Senator," said another, "but it'll still take a lot of doing to swing a secession. A lot of families have never recovered from the civil war of two hundred years ago."

"I reckon we could do it if we had the right names to head it up," said a third man. "All of us here are vote-getters all right, but I doubt if any of us—even you, Senator—is popular enough to pull all twelve states behind him."

To their surprise, the senator nodded. "You're right," he said. "I can pull every vote in my own state, just as each of you can, but I couldn't be elected dog-catcher in some of your states. I have given this a lot of thought, gentlemen, and I have the answer. There are two men—and in my opinion, two men only—whose names have the power to unify our twelve states."

"Who?"

"Gentlemen," Senator Beauregarde said solemnly, "I give you as president of the New Confederate States of America that unreconstructed rebel, the direct descendent of our only other president, Jefferson Davis Masters. And as vice president of the New Confederate States of America that sterling son of the South, Washington Lee Calhoun."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"You're right, of course, Senator," one of the men said. "But aren't you forgetting something?"

"What, suh?"

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"That Jeff Masters and Lee Calhoun left the Earth ten years ago and went to the planet Venus. I was there, Senator, when they took off in the space ship they named *The Sour Apple Tree,* and I heard Jeff Masters say he'd never come back to Earth until the Negroes were in the slave cabins where they belonged."

"Exactly where secession will put them, suh," the senator said.

"Another point, Senator. . . If Masters and Calhoun were here, there is no doubt that their leadership would make secession easy. But we have no way of knowing if they're even alive. Venus is a wild and savage planet and the odds are against them surviving there."

"Don't you believe it, suh," the senator said. "I have taken the trouble to read the report prepared for the government by Harper and Wilkins who explored Venus five years before Jeff and Calhoun left. It would have taken too much money to make Venus commercially profitable, but there is no reason why mankind can't live comfortably there. The native animals are all small and harmless, except those classified by Wilkins as the dominant species. These are large, hulking animals, inclined to work no more than necessary and said to be fond of songs and rather childish games. So long as they are permitted these simple wants, they are harmless. In fact, in reading the report, the description reminded me of our own darkies."

"Not human are they?"

"Neither are Negroes," snapped the senator. "Besides, gentlemen, do you mean to tell me that any group of savages could threaten the existence of a Southern gentleman? No, suh, if two hundred years of Yankee tyranny didn't crush the Davis and Calhoun families, you can bet your bottom dollar the Venusians couldn't."

"Granting they're alive, Senator," the governor of Mississippi said, "what good does it do us? We have no way of communicating with them. If we were to try to buy or charter a space ship, the publicity would tip our hands and we wouldn't have a chance."

"I thought of that too, Governor," Senator Beauregarde said courteously. "In fact, I have been working on this problem since early last fall when it became obvious that this upstart Thompson was going to win the election. I have been having a space ship built. Yesterday it was completed."

THERE was a moment of confusion as everyone tried to talk at once. It was stopped by the senator holding up his hand.

"At my own expense, I might add," he said. "Not that I am any more generous with my personal money than the rest of you, but because I will have no need for money if this secession fails, and if it succeeds, Yankee money will be no good."

The others laughed. "What about a pilot?" one of them wanted to know.

"As some of you may know, my son has been a government pilot on the Moon line for some time. Through—ah—certain connections in Washington I have arranged for him to have an indefinite leave of absence. I hope it is not necessary to add that my son is first a Southern gentleman and secondly a government pilot."

"So what is your plan, Senator?"

"Just this, gentlemen," the senator said. "The twelve of us will get into the space ship tomorrow night and take off for Venus. Our few associates can prepare the groundwork for secession while we're gone. When we return, bringing Jeff Masters and Lee Calhoun with us, the founding of the New Confederate States will take place immediately. Well, gentlemen?"

The men around the table looked uncertainly at each other, but one by one they nodded their agreement.

"Fine," declared the senator. "You have the rest of today and tomorrow to prepare your associates. You might also leave word that you are going on a vacation, and tomorrow night we can

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leave without anyone being the wiser. For weeks I've been preparing to blast out a lot of old stumps near where the space ship is concealed, so that is what the curious will think they're hearing tomorrow night." He chuckled and filled his glass from the decanter. "Gentlemen," he said, "once again—I give you the New Confederate States of America and our first president, Jefferson Davis Masters."

The men drank with him and left soon after. The senator poured himself another drink and sat for a long time envisioning the new South which would spring forth at his command.

It was after midnight the following day when the twelve men entered the space ship and took off. The few citizens of Atlanta who were awakened by the rocket blasts cursed the senator for dynamiting tree stumps at such an hour, and then went quietly back to sleep.

The first few days of the trip were rough on men more accustomed to sitting in easy chairs than to the acceleration needed to leave Earth. But by the time they were entering the atmosphere of Venus they were all enjoying the trip, relaxing in the way that men can when they know there are no voters near.

The space ship circled three times over the steaming jungles of Venus before the clearing with the gleaming white houses was spotted. Then it settled down on the field with scarcely a bump to the political dignities within. A few yards away from where the ship came to rest there was a hangar which apparently housed the space ship of the settlers. The thirteen men climbed from the ship and breathed deeply of the warm, moist air.

The field was covered with a close-cropped, broad-leafed grass. Around the edge of the field strange tropical plants towered, but beyond them could be seen the roofs of the colonial mansions. Except for the weird, twisting plants, they could almost imagine they were somewhere in the deep South of the United States.

"Look," exclaimed the governor of Mississippi, pointing across the field.

A shambling figure, dressed in faded denim, was approaching them. A dark face gleamed beneath a tattered straw hat.

"Looks like a Negro," said the Party Chairman from Alabama. "Reckon they brought some with them?"

"I imagine it's a native Venusian," Senator Beauregarde said carefully. "I trust Jeff Masters has taught them some English. . . ."

AS THE figure ambled nearer, they could see it was not human. From what they could see, it was definitely saurian, the face ending in a long snout, not unlike that of an alligator. The face and the bare hands and feet were covered with dark scaly hide. Despite the evidence of the denims and the straw hat, the men felt uneasy as the full evidence of the figure's origin was impressed upon them.

The Venusian stopped in front of them. He bobbed his head, in a gesture they found familiar and comforting, and gave them a toothy grin.

"Gemmun," the Venusian said, and the accent was music to their ears, "I'se heah to welcome yo' all to de Confedahate States ob Venus. Iffen you' all ain't Yankees, it would pleasure Marse Jeff to hab' yo' all come to de big house."

"Well, I'll be damned," Senator Beauregarde said in an aside. He turned to the Venusian. "What's your name, boy?"

"Sambo, suh," the Venusian said, bobbing his head again. The double row of teeth, fully two inches long, flashed whitely in his black face.

"Well, Sambo," the senator said in good humor, "we aren't Yankees, so I guess you can show us to the big house."

The Venusian turned and shuffled off. The men followed him, marveling at the things they saw, up a long winding lane, past rows of tumble-down slave cabins. Wide-eyed little Venusians, their coarse manes done up in pigtails, played in front of the cabins. They caught

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glimpses of calico dresses as Venusian mammies peered from inside.

As they neared the big white house, the scent of magnolias was heavy in the air. Above the house, a flag rippled in the gentle Venusian breeze. It was a white flag with a red bar and a field of blue with seven white stars. The men removed their hats solemnly as they caught sight of it.

A large-framed man, wearing frock coat, ruffled white shirt and black string tie, sat on the wide verandah of the house. He was peering in their direction. Suddenly, he sprang to his feet and strode down the path to meet them.

"Senator Beauregarde?" he exclaimed in disbelief. His eyes went from face to face. "Governor Shelby—Henry Todhunter — Gilmore Bragg — Pinkham Rutherford — George Howard — By Heaven, this is a day!"

"Jeff Masters," Senator Beauregarde said and reached for the outstretched hand.

"By God, suh," Jefferson Davis Masters said, emotion shaking his voice. "I never thought I'd live to see the likes of this day. This calls for a celebration." He turned toward the house and bellowed: "Rufus! Where are you, you lazy scoundrel?"

A big Venusian came running from the house. "Yassuh," he said. "Yassuh, Marse Jeff?"

"Run to the other houses and tell them we have company — Confederate company. Get going, you darky rascal!"

"Yassuh." The Venusian was off with the speed of a horse.

It was a grand reunion that afternoon. The men who were fresh from Earth sat on the wide verandah, mint juleps in their hands, surrounded by the families who had settled on Venus. They talked, almost without a pause, about the Beauregardes, the Masters', the Beechers, the Tylers, the Braggs, the Jacksons, Howards, Rutherfords, Todhunters, and every other family of quality in the South. They described the newest children born during the last ten years, related the funerals that had occurred, and Senator Beauregard handed over a dozen recipes which his great-aunt Betsy had insisted on sending to the wife of Washington Lee Calhoun.

BY EVENING they were well caught up on the gossip of ten years. They went in to a dinner which might have been served in the old Masters mansion in Atlanta. There were heaping mounds of Southern fried chicken, smoking yams, popovers so light they seemed to float, and even fresh cornbread. A white-coated Venusian served the dinner and hovered around the guests to be sure they continued to eat.

"This friend chicken," said the senator as he tackled his tenth piece, "would make great-aunt Betsy turn green with envy, and she brags of having the best cook in the country. How do you manage it, Jeff?"

"Got a good cook, Senator. Trained her the only right way—with the family recipes in one hand and a blacksnake whip in the other." He indicated the grinning butler. "This is Uncle Tom, one of the best boys I ever had. His wife does the cooking."

"Yassuh," said the Venusian. "Chloe sho knows how to make chicken jus' the way Marse Jeff likes it. Have some mo', Senator."

After dinner, the men went out on the verandah and lighted cheroots. Twilight was already lowering over the Venusian landscape. From the direction of the slave cabins, they could hear the soft thrumming of a banjo. A few minutes later, a number of voices were lifted in *Old Uncle Ned.*

"Well, Jeff," Senator Beauregarde said, leaning back comfortably, "looks like you've done a good job up here. No trouble with your slaves, huh?"

"Never have trouble when you treat them right," Masters declared. "There isn't a Venusian here that doesn't like serving a white man. The only thing that ever bothers me is that they have such thick skins I suspect they never feel it

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when we whip them—but I guess they like it because it shows who's boss."

The men sat silently, the smoke of their cigars mingling with the magnolia-scented air. It was Jefferson Davis Masters who finally broke the silence.

"What brings you here, Senator?" he asked. "Don't tell me those carpetbagger Yankees finally chased you out of the country."

"They're trying to," the senator said. "They've just elected a Negro as president of the United States."

"By God," Masters exclaimed, slapping his knee. "I knew they'd do that some day! My own great-grandaddy said, more'n a hundred years ago, that the way the Yankees were going there'd be a black man sitting in the White House before we knew it. I saw it coming ten years ago when I left. Give a Negro an inch, I always said, and he'll steal the whole damn yardstick. . . . Well, Senator, you're all welcome to move here. There are enough slaves to go around and I aim to see that they keep their place. No damn carpetbaggers will ever set foot on Venus."

"I reckon we're a little more ambitious than that, Jeff," the senator said. "We were thinking about the New Confederate States of America—with Jefferson Davis Masters as the first president."

There was a long silence while Masters stared toward the glimmering lights of the slave cabins.

"We need you, Jeff," the senator said. "The South needs you."

"When I left Earth ten years ago," Masters said finally, "I swore I'd never set foot on it again until every black in the country was back in the slave cabins. But I reckon a man has no right to think only of himself and forget the plight of his kinfolk. It's been mighty confortable here on Venus, Senator—but if my help is needed, then, by Heaven, I'll do it, suh!"

"Spoken like a real Southerner," the senator said. "What about you, Lee?" he asked, turning to the tall lanky descendant of the Confederate general.

"Well," drawled Washington Lee Calhoun, "it's mighty nice here on Venus. We've gotten to the point where the slaves talk the way that makes a man feel at home. Did you ever hear a bunch of Southern darkies sing prettier than that?"

They all listened to the strains of *My Old Kentucky Home* coming from the cabins where the Venusians lived.

"And," continued Lee, "you saw for yourself, Senator, how they can cook fried chicken and mix a mint julep. Still, I reckon that blood's thicker than water. It'll be an honor to work with Jeff and you gentlemen."

They shook hands on it and the conversation became more general. The senator told stories of Washington and the governor of Mississippi told how he'd walked from the last party convention. The hours passed swiftly and pleasantly and they soon went to bed to be lulled to sleep by the crooning voices below.

THEY were up early the next morning and after a substantial Southern breakfast the slaves were set to work packing. The Venusians worked hard enough, although they seemed puzzled by what was going on. Several times, clusters of them gathered to whisper until the little groups were broken up by their masters.

By noon, everything was packed and stored in the two space ships in the field. The families, dressed in their finest, and the thirteen men marched down past the cabins and into the field. The Venusians shambled along behind them.

When they stood beside the space ships, Jefferson Davis Masters turned to the slaves.

"Rufus," he called.

"Yassuh," answered the big Venusian, and for the first time that morning the grin returned to his dark face.

"We're going away, Rufus," Masters said. "If we never come back, all of you may consider yourselves freed. But if we do come back and find that any of you have broken into the big houses, I'll

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tan your black hide. Understand?"

"Yassuh." The big Venusian shuffled about uncertainly. "Marse Jeff?" he said.

"What is it, Rufus?"

"Is yo' all goin' away—back whar yo' come from?"

"That's what I said," Masters said impatiently.

"Does dat mean us ain't gwine habe nobody to wait on? Ain't gwine habe nobody to sing to?"

"You can sing to yourselves. Are you daring to question your master, you black rascal?"

"Nassuh," the big Venusian said. He turned his head and exchanged words with another Venusian in their soft native tongue. He turned back just as Jefferson Davis Masters started for the space ship. "Marse Jeff," he called.

"What is it now?" demanded Masters.

"Us can't let yo' go."

"What do you mean, boy?" demanded Masters, his face darkening with rage.

"Can't let yo' go," the Venusian insisted stubbornly. "For maybe a millyun years us live here and us play games wid de others dat live here. But, one by one, dey all stop bein' here. Den for a thousan' years us don't habe nobody to play wid. Den Marse Jeff, Marse Lee, an' yo' all come here and us habe fun again. Now yo' want to go trottin' off and leave yo' cute, li'l slaves—dat's what Missy Clementine call us jus' de other day. Us habe no fun if yo' leave."

"If I had my whip here, I'd teach you how to have fun," Masters said angrily. "Now, shut up and go to your cabins. . . Come on, Clara Jane," he added to his wife and stepped toward the ship.

But the big Venusian, known affectionately as Rufus, stepped faster. His mouth opened and closed with a snap. When it opened again, Jefferson Davis Masters lay dead upon the ground and the grin of the Venusian slave no longer flashed so whitely.

The small group of Earth people

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . ."

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GREAT WAY to start your day! A few drops of 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic each morning check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . give your hair that handsome, natural look. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . and it's economical, too!

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stared at four hundred Venusians over the quiet body of the man who was to have been the first president of the New Confederate States of America.

Four hundred heads bobbed while four hundred mouths stretched in lazy grins. The gentle Venusian breeze ruffled the faded denim and calico. The little Venusians, their manes carefully done in pigtails, peeped shyly from behind their mothers' skirts.

"Marse Jeff is hurt," the big Venusian slave said. He shook his head woefully. "Ah knowed dere was a hex on dat big ship!" He looked expectantly at the Earth men and when none of them moved, he raised his voice. "Tom, yo' lazy rascal," he shouted, "come here and tote Marse Jeff to de big house. See dat yo' lay his body out real nice now!"

As the Venusian shuffled off with the body of Jefferson Davis Masters, it was Senator Beauregarde who broke the silence.

"I think we'd better go back to the house," he said. "I think that's what this —what Rufus is waiting for." It was the voice of a man who always knew how the vote was going. He had looked at the flashing grins of the Venusians slaves and knew the returns were in.

ALL afternoon, the slaves toiled in the hot sun, carrying luggage back into the houses, singing the old folk-songs as they worked. It was Uncle Tom who came upon the huddled humans in the huge ballroom of the Masters mansion.

"What's de matter?" he asked, a worried look on the dark saurian face. "Don't act feared. Dat ain't no way for quality folk to act." He rubbed his black, scaly hands together. "I'se gonna take care ob yo' all," he said. "Us is gonna make fried chicken fo' yo'—jus' de way Marse Jeff always liked it—every single day. . . An' right now, I'se gonna mix up a batch ob dem mint juleps fo' de gemmun." He hurried out.

So they drank mint juleps, which turned sour in their mouths, but it was far better than facing the worried solicitude of the slaves. And they ate fried chicken, with dumplings, until there wasn't a one of them who didn't groan with relief when Uncle Tom stopped bringing the heaping platters. After dinner, Uncle Tom hustled the men out to the verandah and saw to it that they had plenty of bourbon and cheroots.

"Now, ain't dat better?" he asked proudly. "If yo' all went back whar yo' come from, de white-trash dere wouldn't know how to take care of yo'. But, now, I'se gonna be right here, lookin' after yo' —forever. Yassuh."

He went back inside. The men sat silently on the verandah and the scent of magnolias was heavy.

Below the house, in a field of pleasant green, they could see the slaves gathered about the freshly-dug mound. And, presently, the quavering voices floated up to where they sat.

The words of the song were old and familiar.

"Massa made de darkies love him,
Cayse he was so kind,
Now dey sadly weep above him,
Mourning cayse he leave dem behind.
I cannot work before tomorrow,
Cayse de tear drop flow.
I try to drive away my sorrow
Pickin on de old banjo.
Down in de cornfield,
Hear dat mournful sound:
All de darkies am a-weeping,
Massa's in de cold, cold ground."

The voices were stilled, but the melody seemed to linger on—forever.

Coming in Next Month's Issue

POTEMKIN VILLAGE by Fletcher Pratt

A Biting Satire on the Effects of Totalitarianism

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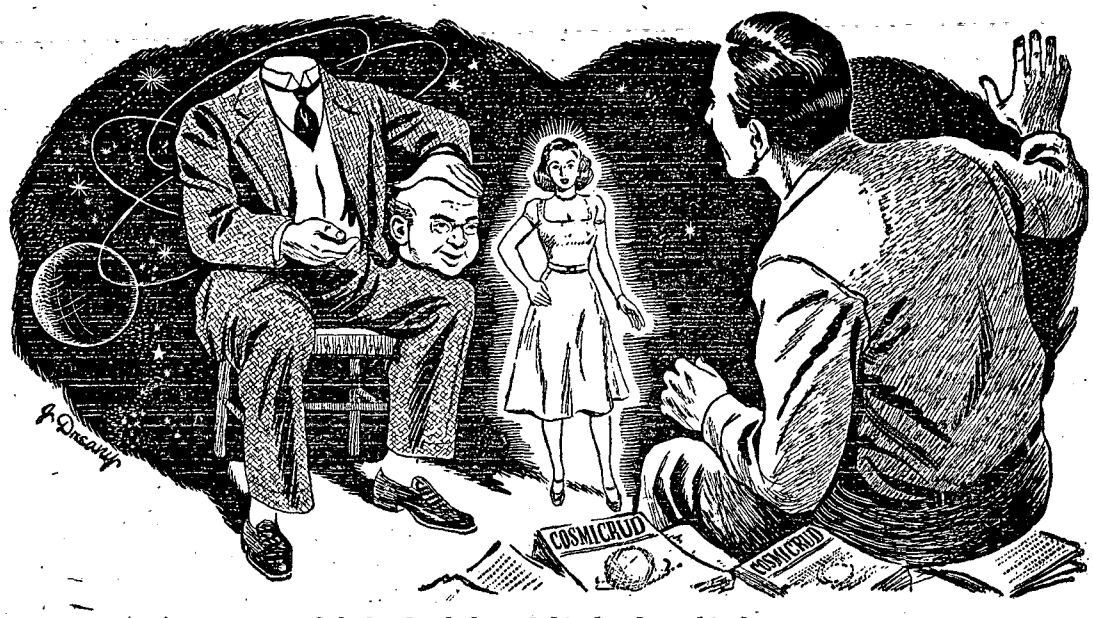

Calmly, he balanced his head on his knee

No Charge to the Membership

By ROGER DEE

Would you believe a dream—if it came true?

JERRY MACKLIN was pasting a quarter-column India-ink drawing of a Hydra-headed BEM into the Page Five mockup of his sometimes-monthly fanzine *Cosmicrud,* fitting it with painstaking care between a hung-over account of Chicon II and a fanreview roasting the latest issue of (promag) *Stupendous Stories,* when his landlady called him downstairs.

Jerry put his copy of *Space Medicine* across the paste-damp drawing to prevent curling and went down hastily, reluctant to suspend operations on *Cosmicrud*—he had made a heroic effort to scoop the field on the recent startling appearance in Montana of the first genuine Visitors From Space, and as a consequence the issue was already seventeen days late—but even more reluctant to risk eviction by antagonizing Mrs. Bascombe further. In the downstairs parlor, a melancholy cell doilied and antimacassared to a state of specious gentility, he found Mrs. Bascombe holding his visitors at bay.

There were two of them, a man and a girl.

The man was small and bald, with a middle-forties stomach and solemn blue

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eyes that blinked neatly behind the shiny pince-nez gripping his button nose. The girl was something else again—Jerry retained a giddy impression of melting brown eyes and soft auburn hair and a figure designed to the most exacting specifications, but the overall effect left him practically blind to details.

"*Ulp,*" he said helplessly. Then, feeling the goad of Mrs. Bascombe's intolerant eye: "You wanted to see me?"

"If you are the Jerry Macklin who edits *Cosmicrud,*" the small man answered, "yes."

They were definitely not bill collectors, since the printer who handled Jerry's photo-offset work had agreed as usual to wait an extra week for his pay. They couldn't be postal inspectors come to ban *Cosmicrud* from the mails, either—they didn't have the proper mild-but-merciless look. And besides that, Jerry told himself, *Cosmicrud* was solid, as clean as a cat's coiffure.

They could be reporters, though. Jerry felt his ears burn at the thought; he had been interviewed once before by a glibly sympathetic newshound who promised a favorable press on local science fiction activities, but who subsequently turned out a puling column devoted entirely to zap-guns and helicopter beanies. . . .

"I am Miriam Dunn," the girl said. "My Brother, Clarence . . . We've come all the way from Cincinnati to meet you, Jerry Macklin—aren't you going to ask us up to see your back files and swap guesses about what the Visitors From Space look like?"

Came the light. They were fen.

"Wild comets and novae," Jerry said, "couldn't stop me!"

But when he ushered them upstairs he paused long enough for a diplomatic aside with the stonily dubious Mrs. Bascombe. "This isn't a fan meeting, Mrs. B., just a visit. There won't be any noise, I promise."

Mrs. Bascombe glared suspiciously at the retreating backs but held her peace.

IN HIS room, they held high holiday. The Dunns made appropriate sounds of envy over Jerry's back files of *Cosmicrud,* his collector's treasure of long-defunct fanzine greats and his first-edition (autographed) hard-covers by Brown and Leiber. They handled his two-inch telescope with respect, taking due note of its optional forty-, sixty- and hundred-power eyepieces, and they were particularly fascinated by his composite skyscape of Smithsonian star maps that covered the entire west wall.

Until the subject of the Visitors From Space came up, that is; from that moment no other topic was possible.

"For two nights after the ship landed," Jerry admitted without shame, "I didn't sleep a wink for fear I'd miss something. I'd read about this and dreamed of it all these years, and then all of a sudden—*bingo,* they're *here.* Just like that they came down in Montana and—"

"And the Army clamped the lid on but quick," Miriam said. "We've had a zillion second-hand rumors since, but not a glimpse of the Visitors. What do you think they'll look like, Jerry?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Jerry said. He tested the Page Five dummy, found the paste dry enough for handling and passed the sheet around. "This illo just came in from Charlie Kocek up in Louisville, who does most of my art work for *Cosmicrud.* That's his idea of what the Visitors look like."

The Dunns pored over the India-ink BEM, admiring the effect created by its nine fanged heads and its radioactive scales.

"Kocek has a nice eye for detail," said Clarence Dunn. "We stopped off in Louisville to see him on our way down. Neat sketch, this, but of course it can't be accurate."

"The Visitors may even look like us, for that matter," Miriam said. "What do you think they want here, Jerry?"

Jerry shrugged helplessly. "Who knows? I've read a thousand stories that started off just like this, but now

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that it's actually happening I can't even guess how it'll end."

"Miriam and I have a theory," Clarence said. He sat on Jerry's chair at the typing table, carefully avoiding the bed with its *Cosmicrud* dummies of Pages One through Four, and blinked at Jerry through his pince-nez. "We think that the crew of that Montana ship is made up from dozens of different stellar races, and that all those races are members of a sort of Galactic Union. We think they've come here to invite us to join their Union and that they're busy right now, Army or no Army, canvassing Earth to choose a representative group of humans to make a faster-than-light-speed tour of the galaxy and see what is being offered us."

"Lovely thought," Jerry said, his eyes shining. "Good Lord, what a break for our high-brass astronomers and physicists and—"

"A prime point in our theory," Clarence said, "is that those very authorities are the ones who *wouldn't* be asked to go, because they'd find the universe out there so different from what they expect that their specialized knowledge would be more a handicap than a help. They'd find that they were no nearer to the actual rudiments of their sciences than any layman in the street, and because of that they'd make poorer observers than laymen. The human mind reaches peak intelligence in its teens—later years make men better able to interpret their environment in terms of experience, but that acquired ability also makes it impossible for them to accept really new and radical concepts. Astronomers and physicists and cosmogonists would be barred from the tour because their thought-patterns are too rigidly set. They'd never be able to grasp the actuality of the universe as it really is without going mad."

"Only a very small minority of Earth-people *could* grasp it," Miriam said. "Poets, for instance, and surrealistic painters and science fiction fen. Especially the fen, because they're conditioned to accept *anything*."

"If I thought you were right," Jerry said, "wild comets and novae couldn't keep me out of Montana. I'd stow away on that ship if I died in the stowing!"

HE MOVED over to his star maps on the wall, tracing constellation after constellation out through the infinity of space and letting the old wonder and excitement grip him like a hand. What was it, he wondered for the thousandth time, that seized on normal human beings and turned them overnight into science fiction fans? It couldn't be the simple lure of novelty or of vicarious adventure—those things could be had here on Earth, without turning to the stars.

There was more to it than that. Much more. . . .

He had formed his picture long ago of what it would be like out there when men finally made the Big Jump. The trackless black pit of space, reaching limitless forever; the giant suns threading their ways through the void in fiery procession, each ringed by its own strange brood of planets; a myriad of worlds waiting, some green and some dead, some just born and still wrapped in their swaddlings of volcanic ashes and flames. . . .

"You won't have to stow away," Clarence Dunn said. "To the initiate, the tour is free. That's why we came here, to invite you to go with us."

Jerry sat down abruptly on the bed, crumpling mockup Pages One through Four of *Cosmicrud* beyond all hope of salvage.

"Nuts," he said hollowly. "If you're trying to tell me that you two are Visitors From—"

"You've no dependents or near relatives," Miriam said reasonably. "And you've wished all your life for a chance like this. Why shouldn't you take it now?"

The obvious answer to it all brought to Jerry a conflict of relief and disappointment. It was a rib, of course, a

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hoax cooked up between these two and Charlie Kocek in Louisville, and if he had been taken in he'd never hear the last of it. He'd have been laughed right out of fandom.

Clarence and Miriam Dunn looked knowingly at each other.

"The same reaction every time," said Miriam. "How consistent can you get? Isn't it amazing that they should all nurse the same dream, but refuse to believe it when it comes true?"

They turned on Jerry together, curiously, and in spite of his knowledge that it was a hoax he felt his head spin a little.

"Look," Jerry said. "It's a beautiful buildup, so good that I wish it were true. But when you go back through Louisville you can tell Charlie Kocek that—"

The Dunns exchanged another look.

"He doesn't believe us," Miriam said. "You'll have to show him, Xyptll."

The little man took off his head and balanced it on his knees. Its blue eyes blinked neatly behind their shiny pince-nez, following Jerry's reaction solemnly when he sprang up and kicked over his typing table.

"You see?" Xyptll-Dunn's voice said from his vacant shirt collar. It sounded slightly louder without the obstructing head.

"Xyptll is an Albirean," Miriam said. "From the constellation you call Cygni. He's a species of crystalline mineral life, a rhombic dodecahedron about the size of a terrestrial orange."

Disenchantment and disillusion all but canceled out Jerry's shock. He stared at Miriam in sudden horror, and flinched when she gave him back a look of impish understanding.

"Wrong again," she said. "Xyptll and I are from different sectors entirely. On my world we're not built like oranges, Jerry Macklin. I'm exactly what I seem."

For proof she tugged at her own shapely head with both hands, and it held fast. She did levitate briefly, however, to a height of three or four feet.

Jerry took a deep breath.

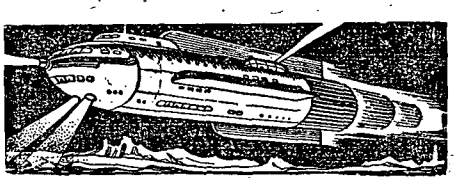
"If you're reading my mind," he said, "you're asking for it. I'll be damned if I'll apologize for what I'm thinking."

She laughed. "You might just possibly find out for yourself, at that. But you'll have competition—half the fen in the world will be along on that tour, and you know how *they* are."

Xyptll-Dunn settled his head back into his shirt collar and stood up. "We leave early tomorrow morning. I take it you've decided to come with us?"

Jerry went into the bathroom and came back with his razor and toothbrush.

"Why wait till tomorrow?" he said. "Wild comets and novae. . . ."



It was a fantastic prison world . . . where slave-creatures of a hundred spheres dreamed and plotted escape! Read—PLANET OF THE DAMNED by Jack Vance, Featured in the December Issue of

SPACE STORIES

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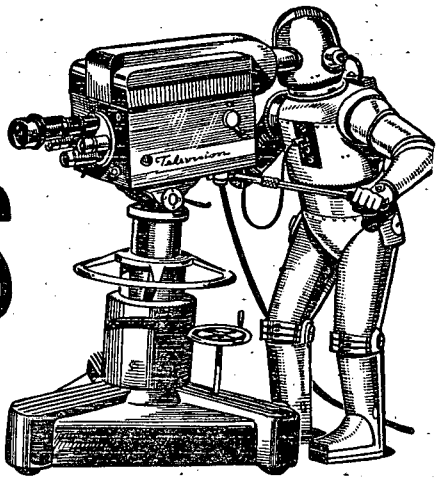
The Walkie-Lookie

VIDEO-TECHNICS

by PAT JONES



VARIOUSLY described as the "walkie-lookie" and the "creepie-peepie," RCA has developed a portable, cableless television camera and transmitter. It passed its major test at the political convention in Chicago last summer.

The effectiveness of this camera was demonstrated by the many candid type shots which added human interest to the convention coverage, and brightened the political reports direct from the floor of *International Amphitheatre.*

Maximum use of this new camera was made by Ad Scheider, Special Events Director of NBC-TV and F. A. Wankel, Director of Technical Operation when planning the convention coverage. You must remember the shots of enthusiastic partisans on the floor, and the off-guard moments of many of the delegates and candidates. Such would have been impossible with the more cumbersome, stable units even when placed on mobile trucks.

The walkie-lookie, weighing only fifty pounds, can be carried wherever there is room for a single person, and gives an intimate, close-up view of colorful happenings.

The forerunner of the walkie-lookie was the walkie-pushie, a self-contained power unit first used in covering the 1952 Rose Bowl Game and the Pasadena Tournament of Roses.

This was the first camera to be unencumbered by lines and cables which previously limited the mobility of tv field equipment. It was mounted on a 3-wheel platform, four by six feet in size. The platform carried twenty auto-type storage batteries which provided the power necessary to operate the camera. One cameraman and one video engineer rode the platform while three others maneuvered it.

Now RCA has carried this one step further, and developed a tv camera that one man can operate. The portable equipment now in use is suspended, knapsack fashion, from the narrator's shoulders by flexible straps. Two small antennae extend from the top of the pack and are used respectively to transmit the picture signal to a base station and to receive voice and control signals from the same point.

Based on the vidicon photo-conductive pickup tube, the battery-powered tv camera can operate on the same tube for nearly two hours within a half-mile radius of its base station, thence to the network and to home viewers.

The equipment contains 42 tubes which, with their associated circuits, provide all synchronizing frequencies for a standard 525-line, 30-frame interlaced television picture.

Included in the unit are the battery-operated power supply, deflecting circuits, amplifiers, and a radio for receiving instruction and other essential information from the control point. The walkie-lookie has an additional feature—a viewfinder for the cameraman. This is a small kinescope picture tube which enables him to see an exact reproduction of the picture the walkie-lookie is taking.

The men responsible for the development of the walkie-lookie in time for the greatest political coverage the world has ever known were RCA engineers L. E. Flory, W. S. Pike, Jr., J. E. Dilley and J. M. Morgan working under the direction of Dr. V. K. Zworykin, himself one of the pioneers in the television field.

Based on the 17,800,000 tv sets now in use, it is probable that more than 70,000,000 viewers were in range of the convention scenes. It is interesting to note that when tv covered the 1948 conventions in Philadelphia, distribution of the featured programs was limited to 5,000,000 persons along the Eastern seaboard. It seems obvious—1952 is the year that elected tv!

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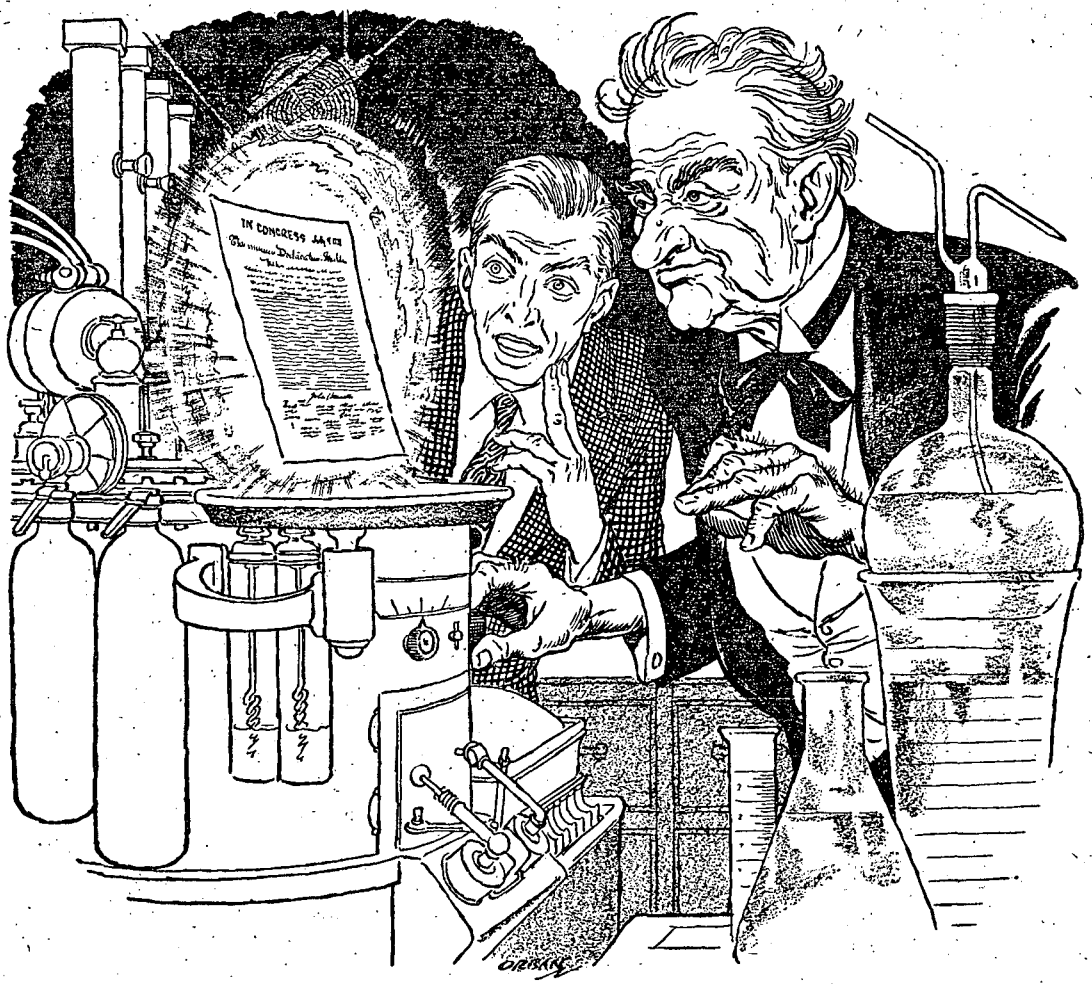
Even the Old Professor Could Not Foresee the Past!



I had seen many reproductions, but this was the real thing

BUTTON, BUTTON

IT WAS the tuxedo that fooled me and for two seconds I didn't recognize him. To me, he was just a possible client, the first that had whiffed my way in a week—and he looked beautiful.

Even wearing a tuxedo at 9:45 A.M. he looked beautiful. Six inches of bony wrist and ten inches of knobbly hand continued on where his sleeve left off; the top of his socks and the bottom of his trousers did not quite join forces; still he looked beautiful.

Then I looked at his face and it wasn't a client at all. It was my uncle Otto.

By ISAAC ASIMOV

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Beauty ended. As usual, my uncle Otto's face looked like a bloodhound that had just been kicked in the rump by his best friend.

I wasn't very original in my reaction. I said, "Uncle Otto!"

You'd know him too, if you saw that face. When he was featured on the cover of Time about five years ago (it was either '57 or '58), 204 readers by count wrote in to say that they would never forget that face. Most added comments concerning nightmares. If you want my uncle Otto's full name, it's Otto Schlemmelmayer. But don't jump to conclusions. He's my mother's brother. My own name is Smith.

He said, "Harry, my boy," and groaned.

Interesting, but not enlightening. I said, "Why the tuxedo?"

He said, "It's rented."

"All right. But why do you wear it in the morning."

"Is it morning already?" He stared vaguely about him, then went to the window and looked out.

That's my uncle Otto Schlemmelmayer.

I assured him it was morning and with an effort he deduced that he must have been walking the city streets all night.

He took a handful of fingers away from his forehead to say, "But I was so upset, Harry. At the banquet—"

The fingers waved about for a minute and then folded into a quart of fist that came down and pounded holes in my desk top. "But it's the end. From now on I do things my own way."

MY UNCLE OTTO had been saying that since the business of the "Schlemmelmayer Effect" first started up. Maybe that surprises you. Maybe you think it was the Schlemmelmayer Effect that made my uncle Otto famous. Well, it's all in how you look at it.

He discovered the Effect back in 1952 and the chances are you know as much about it as I do. In a nutshell, he devised a germanium relay of such a nature as to respond to thoughtwaves, or anyway, to the electro-magnetic fields of the brain cells. He worked for years to build such a delay into a flute, so that it would play music under the pressure of nothing but thought. It was his love, his life, it was to revolutionize music. Everyone would be able to play; no skill necessary—only thought.

Then, five years ago, this young fellow at Consolidated Arms, Stephen Wheland, modified the Schlemmelmayer Effect and reversed it. He devised a field of supersonic waves that could activate the brain via a germanium relay, fry it, and kill a rat at twenty feet. Also, they found out later, men.

After that, Wheland got a bonus of ten thousand dollars and a promotion, while the major stockholders of Consolidated Arms proceeded to make millions when the government bought the patents and placed its orders.

My uncle Otto? He made the cover of Time.

After that, everyone who was close to him, say within a few miles, knew he had a grievance. Some thought it was the fact he had received no money; others that his great discovery had been made an instrument of war and killing.

Nuts! It was his flute! That was the real tack on the chair of his life. Poor Uncle Otto. He loved his flute. He carried it with him always, ready to demonstrate. It reposed in its special case on the back of his chair when he ate, and at the head of his bed when he slept. Sunday mornings in the University physics laboratories were made hideous by the sounds of my uncle Otto's flute, under imperfect mental control, flatting its way through some tearful German folk-song.

The trouble was that no manufacturer would touch it. As soon as its existence was unveiled, the musicians' union threatened to silence every demi-quaver in the land; the various entertainment industries called its lobbyists to attention and marked them off in brigades for instant action; and even old Pietro Far-

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anini stuck his baton behind his ear and made fervent statements to the newspapers about the impending death of art.

Uncle Otto never recovered.

He was saying, "Yesterday were my final hopes. Consolidate informs me they will in my honor a banquet give. Who knows, I say to myself. Maybe they will my flute buy." Under stress, my uncle Otto's word-order tends to shift from English to Germanic.

The picture intrigued me.

"What an idea," I said. "A thousand giant flutes secreted in key spots in enemy territories blaring out singing commercials just flat enough to—"

"Quiet! Quiet!" My uncle Otto brought down the flat of his hand on my desk like a pistol shot, and the plastic calendar jumped in fright and fell down dead. "From you also mockery? Where is your respect?"

"I'm sorry, uncle Otto."

"Then listen. I attended the banquet and they made speeches about the Schlemmelmayer Effect and how it harnessed the power of mind. Then when I thought they would announce they would my flute buy, they give me this!"

He took out what looked like a two thousand dollar gold-piece and threw it at me. I ducked.

HAD IT hit the window, it would have gone through and brained a pedestrian, but it hit the wall. I picked it up. You could tell by the weight that it was only gold-plated. On one side it said: "The Elias Bancroft Sudford Award" in big letters and "to Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer for his contributions to science" in small letters. On the other side was a profile, obviously not of my uncle Otto. In fact, it didn't look like any breed of dog; more like a pig.

"That," said my uncle Otto, "is Elias Bancroft Sudford, chairman of Consolidated Arms!"

He went on, "So when I saw that was all, I got up and very politely, said: 'Gentlemen, dead drop!' and walked out."

"Then you walked the streets all night," I filled in for him, "and came here without even changing your clothes. You're still in your tuxedo."

My uncle Otto stretched out an arm and looked at its covering. "A tuxedo?" he said.

"A tuxedo!" I said.

His long, jowled cheeks turned blotchy red and he roared, "I come here on something of first-rate importance and you insist on about nothing but tuxedos talking. My own nephew!"

I let the fire burn out. My uncle Otto is the brilliant one in the family, so except for trying to keep him from falling into sewers and walking out of windows, we morons try not to bother him.

I said, "And what can I do for you, uncle?"

I tried to make it sound businesslike; I tried to introduce the lawyer-client relationship.

He waited impressively, and said, "I need money."

He had come to the wrong place. I said. "Uncle, right now I don't have—"

"Not from you," he said.

I felt better.

He said, "There is a new Schlemmelmayer Effect; a better one. This one I do *not* in scientific journals publish. My big mouth shut I keep. It entirely my own is." He was leading a phantom orchestra with his bony fist as he spoke.

"From this new Effect," he went on, "I will make money and my own flute factory open."

"Good," I said, thinking of the factory and lying.

"But I don't know how."

"Bad," I said, thinking of the factory and lying.

"The trouble is my mind is brilliant. I can conceive concepts beyond ordinary people. Only, Harry, I can't conceive ways of making money. It's a talent I do not have."

"Bad," I said, not lying at all.

"So I come to you as a lawyer."

I sniggered a little deprecating snigger.

"I come to you," he went on, "to make

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you help me with your crooked, lying, sneaking, dishonest lawyer's brain."

I filed the remark, mentally, under unexpected compliments and said, "I love you, too, uncle Otto."

He must have sensed the sarcasm because he turned purple with rage and yelled, "Don't be touchy. Be like me, patient, understanding, and easygoing, lumphead. Who says anything about you as a man? As a man, you are an honest dunderkopf, but as a lawyer, you have to be a crook. Everyone knows that."

I sighed. The Bar Association warned me there would be days like this.

"What's your new Effect, Uncle Otto?" I asked.

He said, "I can reach back into Time and bring things out of the past."

I acted quickly. With my left hand I snatched my watch out of the lower left vest-pocket and consulted it with all the anxiety I could work up. With my right hand I reached for the telephone.

"Well, Uncle," I said heartily, "I just remembered an extremely important appointment I'm already hours late for. Always glad to see you. And now, I'm afraid I must say good-by. Yes, sir, seeing you has been a pleasure, a real pleasure. Well, good-bye. Yes, sir—"

I failed to lift the telephone out of its cradle. I was pulling up all right, but my uncle Otto's hand was on mine and pushing down. It was no contest. Have I said my uncle Otto was once on the Heidelberg wrestling team in '32?

He took hold of my elbow gently (for him) and I was standing. It was a great saving of muscular effort (for me).

"Let's," he said, "to my laboratory go."

He to his laboratory went. And since I had neither the knife nor the inclination to cut my left arm off at the shoulder, I to his laboratory went also. . . .

MY UNCLE OTTO'S laboratory is down a corridor and around a corner in one of the university buildings. Ever since the Schlemmelmayer Effect had turned out to be a big thing, he had been relieved of all course work and left entirely to himself. His laboratory looked it.

I said, "Don't you keep the door locked anymore?"

He looked at me slyly, his huge nose wrinkling into a sniff. "It *is* locked. With a Schlemmelmayer relay, it's locked. I think a word—and the door opens. Without it, nobody can get in. Not even the President of the University. Not even the *janitor*."

I got a little excited, "Great guns, Uncle Otto. A thought-lock could bring you—"

"Hah! I should sell the patent for someone else rich to get? After last night? Never. In a while, I will myself rich become."

One thing about my uncle Otto. He's not one of these fellows you have to argue and argue with before you can get him to see the light. You know in advance he'll never see the light.

So I changed the subject. I said, "And the time-machine?"

My uncle Otto is a foot taller than I am, thirty pounds heavier, and strong as an ox. When he puts his hands around my throat and shakes, I have to confine my own part in the conflict to turning blue.

I turned blue accordingly.

He said, *"Ssh!"*

I got the idea.

He let go and said, "Nobody knows about Project X." He repeated, heavily. "Project X. You understand?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak anyway with a larynx that was only slowly healing.

He said, "I do not ask you to take my word for it. I will for you a demonstration make."

I tried to stay near the door.

He said, "Do you have a piece of paper with your own handwriting on it?"

I fumbled in my inner jacket pocket. I had notes for a possible brief for a possible client on some possible future day.

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Uncle Otto said, "Don't show it to me. Just tear it up. In little pieces tear it up and in this beaker the fragments put."

I tore it into one hundred and twenty-eight pieces.

He considered them thoughtfully and began adjusting knobs on a—well, on a machine. It had a thick opal-glass slab attached to it that looked like a dentist's tray.

There was a wait. He kept adjusting.

Then he said, *"Aha!"* and I made a sort of queer sound that doesn't translate into letters.

About two inches above the glass tray there was what seemed to be a fuzzy piece of paper. It came into focus while I watched and—oh, well, why make a big thing out of it? It was my notes. My handwriting. Perfectly legible. Perfectly legitimate.

"Is it all right to touch it?" I was a little hoarse, partly out of astonishment and partly because of my uncle Otto's gentle ways of enforcing secrecy.

"You can't," he said, and passed his hand through it. The paper remained behind untouched. He said, "It's only an image at one focus of a four-dimensional paraboloid. The other focus is at a point in time before you tore it up."

I put my hand through it, too. I didn't feel a thing.

"Now watch," he said. He turned a knob on the machine and the image of the paper vanished. Then he took out a pinch of paper from the pile of scrap, dropped them in an ashtray and set a match to it. He flushed the ash down the sink. He turned a knob again and the paper appeared, but with a difference. Ragged patches in it were missing.

"The burned pieces?" I asked.

"Exactly. The machine must trace in time along the hyper-vectors of the molecules on which it is focussed. If certain molecules are in the air dispersed—*pff-f-ft!*"

I had an idea. "Suppose you just had the ash of a document."

"Only those molecules would be traced back."

"But they'd be so well distributed," I pointed out, "that you could get a hazy picture of the entire document."

"Hmm. Maybe."

THE idea became more exciting. "Well, then, look, Uncle Otto. Do you know how much police departments would pay for a machine like this. It would be a boon to the legal—"

I stopped. I didn't like the way he was stiffening. I said, politely, "You were saying, Uncle?"

He was remarkably calm about it. He spoke in scarcely more than a shout. "Once and for all, nephew. All my inventions I will myself from now on develop. First I must some initial capital obtain. Capital from some source other than my ideas selling. After that, I will for my flutes a factory to manufacture open. That comes first. Afterward, afterward, with my profits I can time-vector machinery manufacture. But first my flutes. Before anything, my flutes. Last night, I so swore.

"Through selfishness of a few the world of great music is being deprived. Shall my name in history as a murderer go down? Shall the Schlemmelmayer Effect a way to fry men's brains be? Or shall it beautiful music to mind bring? Great, wonderful, enduring music?"

He had a hand raised oracularly and the other behind his back. The windows gave out a shrill hum as they vibrated to his words.

I said, quickly, "Uncle Otto, they'll hear you."

"Then stop shouting," he retorted.

"But look," I protested, "How do you plan to get your initial capital, if you won't exploit this machinery?"

"I haven't told you. I can make an image real. What if the image is valuable?"

That did sound good. "You mean, like some lost document, manuscript, first edition—things like that?"

"Well, no. There's a catch. Two catches. Three catches."

I waited for him to stop counting, but

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three seemed the limit.

"What are they?" I asked.

He said, "First, I must have the object in the present to focus on or I can't locate it in the past."

"You mean you can't get anything that doesn't exist right now where you can see it."

"Yes."

"In that case, catches two and three are purely academic. But what are they, anyway?"

"I can only remove about a gram of material from the past."

A gram! A thirtieth of an ounce!

"What's the matter? Not enough power?"

My uncle Otto said impatiently, "It's an inverse exponential relationship. All the power in the universe more than maybe two grams couldn't bring."

This left things cloudy. I said, "The third catch?"

"Well." He hesitated. "The further the two foci separated are, the more flexible the bond. It must a certain length be before into the present it can be drawn. In other words, I must at least one hundred fifty years into the past go."

"I see," I said, (not that I really did). "Let's summarize."

I TRIED to sound like a lawyer. "You want to bring something from the past out of which you can coin a little capital. It's got to be something that exists and which you can see so it can't be a lost object of historical or archaeological value. It's got to weigh less than a thirtieth of an ounce so it can't be the Kullinan diamond or anything like that. It's got to be at least one hundred and fifty years old, so it can't be a rare stamp."

"Exactly," said my uncle Otto. "You've got it."

Got what? I thought two seconds. "Can't think of a thing," I said. "Well, good-bye, uncle Otto."

I didn't think it would work, but I turned to go.

It didn't work. My uncle Otto's hands came down on my shoulders and I was standing tip-toe on an inch of air.

"You'll wrinkle my jacket, Uncle Otto."

"Harold," he said. "As a lawyer to a client, you owe me more than a quick good-bye."

"I didn't take a retainer," I managed to gargle. My shirt collar was beginning to fit very tightly about my neck. I tried to swallow and the top button pinged off.

He reasoned, "Between relatives a retainer is a formality. As a client and as an uncle, you owe me absolute loyalty. And besides, if you do not help me out, I will tie your legs behind your neck and dribble you like a basketball."

Well, as a lawyer, I am always susceptible to logic. I said, "I give up. I surrender. You win."

He let me drop.

And then—this is the part that seems most unbelievable to me when I look back at it all—I got an idea.

It was a whale of an idea. A piperoo. The one in a lifetime that everyone gets once in a lifetime.

I didn't tell Uncle Otto the whole thing at the time. I wanted a few days to think about it. But I told him what to do. I told him he would have to go to Washington. It wasn't easy to argue him into it, but, on the other hand, if you know my uncle Otto, there are ways.

I found two ten dollar bills lurking pitifully in my wallet and gave them to him.

I said, "I'll make out a check for the train-fare and you can keep the two tens if it turns out I'm being dishonest with you."

He considered. "A fool to risk twenty dollars for nothing you aren't," he admitted.

He was right, too. . . .

HE WAS back in two days and pronounced the object focussed. After all it was on public view. It's in a nitrogen-filled, air-tight case, but my uncle Otto said that didn't matter. And back

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in the laboratory, four hundred miles away, the focussing remained accurate. My uncle Otto assured me of that, too.

I said, "Two things, uncle Otto, before we do anything."

"What? What? What?" He went on at greater length, "What? What? What? What?"

I gathered he was growing anxious. I said, "Are you sure that if we bring into the present a piece of something out of the past, that piece won't disappear out of the object as it now exists?"

My uncle Otto cracked his large knuckles and said, "We are creating new matter, not stealing old. Why else should we enormous energy need?"

I passed on to the second point. "What about my fee?"

You may not believe this, but I hadn't mentioned money till then. My uncle Otto hadn't either, but then, that follows.

His mouth stretched in a bad imitation of an affectionate smile. "A *fee?*"

"Ten percent of the take," I explained, "is what I'll need."

His jowls drooped, "But how much is the take?"

"Maybe a hundred thousand dollars. That would leave you ninety."

"Ninety thousand— *Himmel!* Then why do we wait?"

He leaped at his machine and in half a minute the space above the dentist's tray was agleam with an image of parchment.

It was covered with neat script, closely spaced, looking like an entry for an old-fashioned penmanship prize. At the bottom of the sheet there were names: one large one and fifty-five small ones.

Funny thing! I choked up. I had seen many reproductions, but this was the real thing. The real Declaration of Independence!

I said, "I'll be damned. You did it."

"And the hundred thousand?" asked my uncle Otto, getting to the point.

Now was the time to explain. "You see, uncle, at the bottom of the document there are signatures. These are the names of great Americans, fathers of their country, whom we all revere. Anything about them is of interest to all true Americans."

"All right," grumbled my uncle Otto, "I will accompany you playing 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' on my flute."

I laughed quickly to show that I took that remark as a joke. The alternative to a joke would not bear thinking of. Have you ever heard my uncle Otto playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever" on his flute?

I said, "But one of these signers, from the state of Georgia, died in 1777, the year after he signed the Declaration. He didn't leave much behind him and so authentic examples of his signature are about the most valuable in the world. His name was Button Gwinnett."

"And how does this help us cash in?" asked my uncle Otto, his mind still fixed grimly on the eternal verities of the universe.

"Here," I said, simply, "is an authentic real-life signature of Button Gwinnett, right on the Declaration of Independence."

My uncle Otto was stunned into absolute silence, and to bring absolute silence out of my uncle Otto, he's really got to be stunned!

I said, "Now you see him right here on the extreme left of the signature space along with the two other signers for Georgia, Lyman Hall and George Walton. You'll notice they crowded their names although there's plenty of room above and below. In fact, the capital G of Gwinnett runs down into practical contact with Hall's name. So we won't try to separate them. We'll get them all. Can you handle that?"

Have you ever seen a happy bloodhound? Well, my uncle Otto managed to look like one.

A spot of brighter light centered about the names of the three Georgian signers.

Uncle Otto said, a little breathlessly, "I have this never tried before."

"What!" I screamed. *Now* he told me.

"It would have too much energy re-

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quired. I did not wish the University to inquire what was in here going on. But don't worry! My mathematics cannot wrong be."

I prayed silently that his mathematics not wrong were.

The light grew brighter and there was a humming that filled the laboratory with raucous noise. My uncle Otto turned a knob, then another, then a third.

DO YOU remember the time a few weeks back when all of upper Manhattan and the Bronx were without electricity for twelve hours because of the damndest overload cut-off in the main power-house. I won't say we did that, because I am in no mood to be sued for damages. But I will say this. The electricity went off when my uncle Otto turned the third knob.

Inside the lab, all the lights went out and I found myself on the floor with a terrific ringing in my ears. My uncle Otto was sprawled across me.

We worked each other to our feet and my uncle Otto found a flashlight.

He howled his anguish. "Fused. Fused. My machine in ruins is. It has to destruction devoted been."

"But the signatures?" I yelled at him. "Did you get them?"

He stopped in mid-cry. "I haven't looked."

He looked, and I closed my eyes. The disappearance of a hundred thousand dollars is not an easy thing to watch.

He cried, "A-ha!" and I opened my eyes quickly. He had a square of parchment in his hand some two inches on a side. It had three signatures on it and the top one was that of Button Gwinnett.

Now, mind you, the signature was absolutely genuine. It was no fake. There wasn't an atom of fraud about the whole transaction. I want that understood. Lying right there on my uncle Otto's broad hand was a signature indited with the Georgian hand of Button Gwinnett himself on the authentic parchment of the honest-to-God, real-life Declaration of Independence!

It was forthwith decided that my uncle Otto would travel down to Washington with the parchment scrap. I was unsatisfactory for the purpose. I was a lawyer. I would be expected to know too much. He was merely a scientific genius, and wasn't expected to know anything. Besides, who could suspect Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer of anything but the most transparent honesty.

We spent a week arranging our story. I bought a book for the occasion in a second-hand shop—an old history of colonial Georgia. My uncle Otto was to take it with him and claim he had found a document among its leaves; a letter to the Continental Congress in the name of the State of Georgia. He had shrugged his shoulders at it and held it out over a Bunsen flame. Why should a physicist be interested in letters? Then he became aware of the peculiar odor it gave off as it burned and the slowness with which it was consumed. He beat out the flames but saved only the piece with the signatures. He looked at it and the name Button Gwinnett had stirred a slight fiber of memory.

He had the story cold. I burnt the edges of the parchment so that the lowest name, that of George Walton, was slightly singed.

"It will make it more realistic," I explained. "Of course, a signature, without a letter above it, loses value, but here we have three signatures, all signers."

My uncle Otto was thoughtful. "And if they compare the signatures with those on the Declaration and notice it is all even microscopically the same. Won't they fraud suspect?"

"Certainly. But what can they do? The parchment is authentic. The ink is authentic. The signatures are authentic. They'll have to concede that. No matter how they suspect something queer they can't prove anything. Can they conceive reaching through time for it? In fact, I hope they do try to make a fuss. The publicity will boost the price."

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The last phrase made my uncle Otto laugh.

The next day he took the train to Washington with visions of flutes in his head. Long flutes, short flutes, bass flutes, flute tremolos, massive flutes, micro flutes, flutes for the individual and flutes for the orchestra. A world of flutes for mind-drawn music.

"Remember," his last words were, "the machine I have no money to rebuild. This must work."

And I said, "Uncle Otto, it can't miss."

Ha!

HE WAS back in a week. I had made long-distance calls each day and each day he told me they were investigating.

Investigating.

Well, wouldn't you investigate? But what good would it do them?

I was at the station waiting for him. He was expressionless. I didn't dare ask anything in public. I wanted to say, "Well, yes or no?" but I thought, let *him* speak.

I took him to my office. I offered him a cigar and a drink. I hid my hands under the desk but that only made the desk shake too, so I put them in my pocket and shook all over.

He said, "They investigated."

"Sure! I told you they would. Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha?"

My uncle Otto took a slow drag at the cigar. He said, "The man at the Bureau of Documents came to me and said, 'Professor Schlemmelmayer,' he said, 'you are the victim of a clever fraud.' I said, 'So? And how can it a fraud be? The signature a forgery is?' So he answered, 'It certainly doesn't look like a forgery, but it must be!' 'And why must it be?' I asked."

My uncle Otto put down his cigar, put down his drink and leaned across the desk toward me. He had me so in suspense, I leaned forward toward him, so in a way I deserved everything I got.

"Exactly," I babbled, "why must it be? They can't prove a thing wrong with it, because it's genuine. Why must it be a fraud, eh? *Why?*"

My uncle Otto's voice was terrifyingly saccharine. He said, "We got the parchment from the past?"

"Yes. Yes. You know we did."

"Well in the past."

"Over a hundred fifty years in the past. You said—"

"And a hundred fifty years ago the parchment on which the Declaration of Independence was written pretty new was. No?"

I was beginning to get it, but not fast enough.

My uncle Otto's voice switched gears and became a dull, throbbing roar, "And if Button Gwinnett in 1777 died, you Godforsaken, dunderlump, how can an authentic signature of his on a new piece of parchment be found?"

After that it was just a case of the whole world rushing backward and forward about me.

I expect to be on my feet soon. I still ache, but the doctors tell me no bones were broken.

Still, my uncle Otto didn't have to make me swallow the damned parchment.

A Manning Draco Howler!

THE CAPHIAN CAPER by KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

Featured in the December Issue of

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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Who's Cribbing ?

By JACK LEWIS

April 2, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

We are returning your manuscript THE NINTH DIMENSION. At first glance, I had figured it a story well worthy of publication. Why wouldn't I? So did the editors of Cosmic Tales back in 1934 when the story was first published.

As you no doubt know, it was the great Todd Thromberry who wrote the story you tried to pass off on us as an original. Let me give you a word of caution concerning the penalties resulting from plagiarism.

It's not worth it. Believe me.

Sincerely,
Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

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April 5, 1952

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Gates:

I do not know, nor am I aware of the existence of any Todd Thromberry. The story you rejected was submitted in good faith, and I resent the inference that I plagiarized it.

THE NINTH DIMENSION was written by me not more than a month ago, and if there is any similarity between it and the story written by this Thromberry person, it is purely coincidental.

However, it has set me thinking. Some time ago, I submitted another story to Stardust Scientifiction, and received a penciled notation on the rejection slip stating that the story was, "too thromberrish".

Who in the hell is Todd Thromberry? I don't remember reading anything written by him in the ten years I've been interested in science fiction.

Sincerely,
Jack Lewis

April 11,1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Re: Your letter of April 5.

While the editors of this magazine are not in the habit of making open accusations and are well aware of the fact in the writing business there will always be some overlapping of plot ideas, it is very hard for us to believe that you are not familiar with the works of Todd Thromberry.

While Mr. Thromberry is no longer among us, his works, like so many other writers', only became widely recognized after his death in 1941. Perhaps it was his work in the field of electronics that supplied him with the bottomless pit of new ideas so apparent in all his works. Nevertheless, even at this stage of science fiction's development it is apparent that he had a style that many of our so called contemporary writers might do well to copy. By "copy," I do not mean rewrite word for word one or more of his works, as you have done. For while you state this has been accidental, surely you must realize that the chance of this phenomenon actually happening is about a million times as great as the occurrence of four pat royal flushes on one deal.

Sorry, but we're not that naive.

Sincerely yours,
Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

April 14, 1952

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Sir:

Your accusations are typical of the rag you publish.

Please cancel my subscription immediately.

Sincerely,
Jack Lewis

April 14, 1952

Science Fiction Society
144 Front Street
Chicago, Ill.

Gentlemen:

I am interested in reading

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some of the works of the late Todd Thromberry.

I would like to get some of the publications that feature his stories.

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

April 22, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

So would we. All I can suggest is that you contact the publishers if any are still in business, or haunt your second hand bookstores.

If you succeed in getting any of these magazines, please let us know. We'll pay you a handsome premium on them.

Yours,
Ray Albert
President,
Science Fiction Society

May 11, 1952

Mr. Sampson J. Gross, Editor
Strange Worlds Magazine
St. Louis, Mo.

Dear Mr. Gross:

I am enclosing the manuscript of a story I have just completed. As you see on the title page, I call it WRECKERS OF TEN MILLION GALAXIES. Because of the great amount of research that went into it, I must set the minimum price on this one at not less than two cents a word.

Hoping you will see fit to use it for publication in your magazine, I remain,

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

May 19, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

I'm sorry, but at the present time we won't be able to use WRECKERS OF TEN MILLION GALAXIES. It's a great yarn though, and if at some future date we decide to use it we will make out the reprint check directly to the estate of Todd Thromberry.

That boy sure could write.

Cordially,
Sampson J. Gross
Editor,
Strange Worlds Magazine

May 23, 1952

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Gates:

While I said I would never have any dealings with you or your magazine again, a situation has arisen which is most puzzling.

It seems all my stories are being returned to me by reason of the fact that except for the byline, they are exact duplicates of the works of this Todd Thromberry person.

In your last letter you aptly described the odds on the accidental occurence of this phenonemon in the case of one story. What would you consider the approximate odds on no less than half a dozen of my writings?

I agree with you—astronomical!

Yet in the interest of all mankind, how can I get the idea across to you that every

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word I have submitted was actually written by me! I have never copied any material from Todd Thromberry, nor have I ever seen any of his writings. In fact, as I told you in one of my letters, up until a short while ago I was totally unaware of his very existence.

An idea has occurred to me however. It's a truly weird theory, and one that I probably wouldn't even suggest to anyone but a science fiction editor. But suppose—just suppose—that this Thromberry person, what with his experiments in electronics and everything, had in some way managed to crack through this time-space barrier mentioned so often in your magazine. And suppose—egotistical as it sounds—he had singled out my work as being the type of material he had always wanted to write.

Do you begin to follow me? Or is the idea of a person from a different time cycle looking over my shoulder while I write, too fantastic for you to accept?

Please write and tell me what you think of my theory?

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

May 25, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Lewis:

We think you should consult a psychiatrist.

Sincerely,
Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

June 3, 1952

Mr. Sam Mines
Science Fiction Editor
Standard Magazines Inc.
New York, 16, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Mines:

While the enclosed is not really a manuscript at all, I am submitting this series of letters, carbon copies, and correspondence, in the hope that you might give some credulity to this seemingly-unbelievable happening.

The enclosed letters are all in proper order and should be self-explanatory. Perhaps if you publish them, some of your readers might have some idea how this phenomenon could be explained.

I call the entire piece WHO'S CRIBBING.

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

June 10, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Lewis:

Your idea of a series of letters to put across a science fiction idea is an intriguing one, but I'm afraid it doesn't quite come off.

It was in the August 1940 issue of MACABRE ADVENTURES that Mr. Thromberry first used this very idea. Ironically enough, the story title also was: WHO'S CRIBBING.

Feel free to contact us again when you have something more original.

Yours,
Samuel Mines
Science Fiction Editor
Standard Magazines Inc.

Watch for the 1953 Edition of WONDER STORY ANNUAL!

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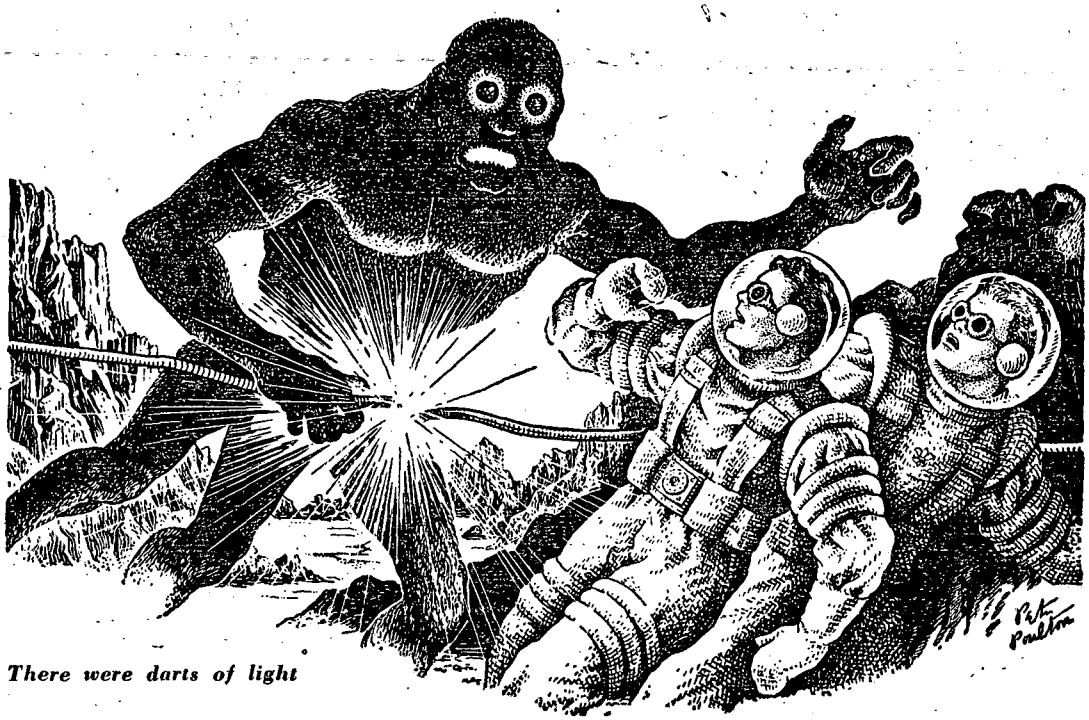

There were darts of light

Three-Legged Joe

By JACK VANCE

He was a triple threat to the fortune that awaited them

IT MIGHT be well to make, in passing, a reference to old-time prospectors. Their experience has been gained through vast hardship and peril; no cause for wonder, then, that as a group they are secretive and solitary. It is hard to win their friendship; they are understandably contemptuous of academic training. Much of their lore will die with them and this is a pity, since locked in their minds is knowledge that might well save a thousand lives.—Excerpt from Appendix II, Hade's Manual of Practical Space Exploration and Mineral Survey.

John Milke and Oliver Paskell sauntered along Bang-out Row in Merlinville. Recent graduates of Highland Technical Institute, they walked with an assured and casual stride in order to convey an impression of hard-boiled competence. Old-timers on porches along the way stared, then turned and muttered briefly to each other.

John Milke was rubicund, energetic, positive; when he walked his cheeks and tidy little paunch jiggled. Oliver Paskell, who was dark, spare and slight, affected old-style spectacles and an underslung pipe. Paskell was noticeably less

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brisk than Milke. Where Milke swaggered, Paskell slouched; where Milke inspected the quiet gray men on the porches with a lordly air, Paskell watched from the corner of his eye.

Milke pointed. "Number 432, right there." He opened the gate, approached the porch with Paskell two steps behind.

A tall bony man sat watching them with eyes pale and hard as marbles.

Milke asked, "You're Abel Cooley?"

"That's me."

"I understand that you're one of the best outside men on the planet. We're going out on a prospect trip; we need a good all-around hand, and we'd like to hire you. You'd have to take care of chow, service space-suits, load samples, things like that."

Abel Cooley studied Mike briefly, then turned his pale eyes upon Paskell. Paskell looked away, out over the swells of naked granite that rolled six hundred miles west and south of Merlinville.

Cooley said in a mild voice, "Where you lads thinking to prospect?"

Milke blinked and frowned. It was his understanding that such questions were more or less taboo, though of course a man had a right to know where his job would take him. "In strict confidence," said Milke, "we're going out to Odfars."

"Odfars, eh?" Cooley's expression changed not at all. "What do you expect to find out there?"

"Well—Pillson's Almanac indicates a very high density. Which, as you may know, means heavy metal. Then the Deed Office shows neither claims nor workings on Odfars, so we thought we'd better survey the territory before someone beat us to it."

Cooley nodded slowly. "So you're going out to Odfars . . . well, I tell you what to do. Get Three-legged Joe to wait on you. He'll make you a good hand."

"Three-legged Joe?" asked Milke in puzzlement. "Where do we find him?"

"He's out on Odfars now."

Paskell came closer. "How do we locate him on Odfars?"

Cooley smiled crookedly. "Don't worry about that. Leave it to Joe. He'll find you."

FROM the house came a dark-skinned man five feet tall and four feet wide. Cooley said, "James, these boys are going prospecting out on Odfars; they're looking for a flunky. Maybe you're interested?"

"Not just now, Abel."

"Maybe Three-legged Joe is the man to see."

"Can't beat Three-legged Joe."

Paskell drew Milke out to the street. "They're joking."

Milke said darkly, "No use trying to get work out of those old bums. They get by on their pensions; they don't want an honest job."

Paskell said thoughtfully, "Perhaps it's as well to go out by ourselves; it might be less trouble in the long run. These old-timers don't understand modern methods. Even if we found a man that satisfied us, we'd have to break him in on the Pinsley generator and the Hurd; he'd have the aerators out of adjustment before we'd been out twice."

Milke nodded. "There'll be more work for us, but I think you're right."

Paskell pointed. "There's the other place—Tom Hand's Chandlery."

Milke consulted a list. "I hope this doesn't turn out to be another wild goose chase; we need those extra filters."

Tom Hand's Chandlery occupied a large dirty building raised off the ground on four-foot stilts. Milke and Paskell climbed up on the loading platform. A scrawny near-bald man approached from out of the shadows. "What's the trouble, boys?"

Milke frowned at his list while Paskell stood aside puffing owlishly on his pipe. "If you'll take us to your technical superintendent," said Milke, "I think I can explain what we need."

The old man reached out two dirty fingers. "Lemme see what you want."

Milke fastidiously moved the list out of reach. "I think I'd better see someone

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in the technical department."

The old man said impatiently, "Son, out here we don't have departments, technical or otherwise. Lemme see what you want. If we got it, I'll know; if we don't, I'll know."

Milke handed over the list. The old man hissed through his teeth. "You want an ungodly amount of them filters."

"They keep burning out on us," said Milke. "I've diagnosed the trouble—an extra load on the circuit."

"Mmph, those things never burn out. You've probably been plugging them in backwise. This side here fits against the black thing-a-ma-jig; this side connects to your circuits. Is that how you had 'em?"

Milke cleared his throat. "Well—"

Paskell took the pipe out of his mouth. "No, as a matter of fact we had them in the other way."

The old man nodded. "I'll give you three. That's all you'll use in a lifetime. Now for this other stuff, we got to go around to the front."

He led them down a dark aisle, past racks crammed with nameless oddments, into a room split by a scarred wooden counter.

At a table near the door three men sat playing cards; nearby stood the dark thick man called James.

James called in a jocular baritone, "Give 'em a jug of acid for Three-legged Joe, Tom. These boys is going out to prospect Odfars."

"Odfars, eh?" Tom scrutinized Milke and Paskell with impersonal interest. "Don't know as I'd try it, boys. Three-legged Joe—"

Milke asked brusquely, "What do we owe you?"

Tom Hand scribbled out a bill, took Milke's money.

Paskell asked tentatively, "Who is this Three-legged Joe? . . . A joke? Or is there actually someone out there?"

Tom Hand bent over his cash box. The men at the table snapped cards along the green felt. James had his back turned.

Paskell put the pipe back in his mouth, sucked noisily.

On the way back, Milke said bitterly, "It's always been the same way; whenever these old-timers have a laugh on a stranger, they play it for all it's worth. . . ."

"But who or what is Three-legged Joe?"

"Well," said Milke, "sooner or later, I suppose we'll find out."

ODFARS ranked fourteenth in a scatter of dead worlds around Sigma Sculptoris, drifting in an orbit so wide that the sun showed like a medium-distant street lamp.

Paskell gingerly handled the controls, while Milke scanned the face of the planet with radar peaked to highest sensitivity. Milke pointed to a mirror-smooth surface winding like a fjord between axe-headed crags. "Look there, an ideal landing site—perfect!"

Paskell said doubtfully, "It looks like a chain of lakes."

"That's what it is—lakes of quicksilver." Milke turned Paskell a chiding glance. "It's absolute zero down there; it can't help but be solid, if that's what's on your mind."

"True," said Paskell. "But it has a peculiar soft look to it."

"If it's liquid," scoffed Milke, "I'll eat your hat."

"If it's liquid," said Paskell, "neither one of us will eat—ever again. Well—here goes."

The impact of landing substantiated Milke's position. He ran to the port, looked out. "Hmmph, can't see anything in this light without booster goggles. In any event, we'll have a good level floor for our assay tent."

Paskell saw in his mind's eye a page from Hade's Manual: "The assay tent is customarily a balloon of plastic film maintained by air pressure. Its use eliminates noxious, acrid or poisonous fumes inside the ship, formerly a source of great annoyance. Certain authorities advise a field survey before bringing out

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the tent; others maintain that erecting the tent first will facilitate examination of samples taken on the survey, and I generally favor the latter practice."

Milke said off-handedly, "Some of the boys like to wait before they put up their bubble; others set it out first thing to give them a place to drop off their samples. I generally like to get it up and out of the way."

"Yes, yes," said Paskell. "Let's get it up."

In space-suits, with booster goggles over their eyes, they left the ship. Paskell looked across the quicksilver lake, up into the jutting rock—icy bright and black through the booster goggles. The lake gleamed like buffed nickel, terminating nearby in a long finger pointing up a defile. In the direction opposite it dropped off around the curve of the horizon.

Paskell said in a tone of dubious humor, "I don't see Three-legged Joe anywhere."

Milke's snort sounded loud in the earphones.

"He's supposed to know we're here."

Milke said crisply, "Let's get to work."

From an exterior locker they took the assay tent, carried it fifty feet across the quicksilver to the length of the air hose. Milke turned the valve; the tent swelled into a half-sphere fifteen feet in diameter.

Milke tested the lock with a deftness attained on lunar field trips. He squeezed the lock compartment against the tent, forcing the enclosed air into the tent through a flap valve; then entering the lock, he sealed the outside entry, opened the inside valve, letting the compartment fill with air, and entered the tent.

"Works fine," he told Paskell confidently. "Let's get the equipment."

FROM the locker they brought the knock-down bench, carried it inside through the lock. Milke brought out a rack of reagents and the pulverizer. Paskell carried out the furnace, then went into the ship for the spectroscope.

"That should be good for a while," said Milke. He shot a glance up at distant Sigma Sculptoris. "It's a six hour day here—about two hours of light left. Feel like taking a quick look around?"

"It might be a good idea." Paskell fingered the empty loop at his belt. "I think I'll get my gun."

Milke chuckled. "There's nothing alive here; it's a vacuum, absolute zero. You've let that talk of Three-legged Joe get you down."

"Quite right," said Paskell. "In any event. I'll feel better with my gun."

Milke followed him into the ship. "Might as well get in the habit of wearing the thing." He holstered his own gun.

They set out across the lake, past the tent, up the narrow finger of quicksilver, into the defile. "Strange stuff," said Paskell chipping a fragment from the cliff. "Looks like chalk—gray chalk."

"Can't be chalk," said Milke. "Chalk is sedimentary."

"Whatever it is," said Paskell, "it's still strange stuff, and it still looks like chalk."

The fissure widened, the cliffs fell away almost at once; another quicksilver lake spread before them. "Makes for easy walking," observed Milke. "Better than scrambling through the rocks."

Paskell eyed the mirror-like surface which wound like a glacier past alternating bluffs, and in a perceptible curve over the horizon. "It might easily be connected all the way around."

Milke motioned to him. "See that pink stone? Rhodocrosite. And look down at the end—somehow it's been fused and reduced, leaving the pure metal."

"Very encouraging," said Paskell.

"Encouraging?" boomed Milke. "Why it's downright wonderful! If we found nothing else but this one vein, we're made . . . perhaps it might even be economical to mine the quicksilver . . ."

Paskell glanced at the sun, "There's not much daylight left; perhaps—"

"Oh, just around that next bend," said

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Milke. "It's easy walking." He pointed ahead to a massive knob of shiny black material projecting from the crag. "Look at that knob of galena—interesting."

Paskell felt a throb and hum at his side. He looked down to the dial, stopped short, walked to the left, turned, walked back to the right. He looked up toward the knob of shiny black rock. "That's not galena, that's pitchblende."

"By Jove," breathed Milke reverently, "you're right! As big as the Margan-Annis strike . . . Oliver, my boy, we're made."

Paskell said with a puckered brow, "I can't understand why the planet hasn't been developed . . ." He glanced nervously up into the deep shadows, perceptibly lengthening. "I wonder—"

"Three-legged Joe?" Milke laughed. "Fairy-tale stuff." He looked at Paskell. "What's the matter?"

Paskell said in husky whisper, "Feel the ground."

Milke stood stock still.

Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump.

THE sun dropped behind a crag; even the boosters found no light in the sudden shade. "Come on," said Paskell. He turned, paced hurriedly back up the lake.

"Wait for me," said Milke breathlessly.

At the ridge of chalky rock which divided the two lakes, they paused, looked back. The ground felt solid, immobile under their feet.

"Strange," said Milke.

"Very strange," said Paskell.

They crossed the ridge; the hulk of their ship caught the last flat rays from Sigma Sculptoris.

Paskell came to a sudden halt. Milke stared at him, then followed his gaze. "Our assay tent!"

They ran forward to where the fabric lay in a crumped heap. "There's been a hole cut in it," muttered Paskell.

"Three-legged Joe?" inquired Milke sarcastically. "More likely there's a leak."

Paskell kicked at the material, now stiff as sheet metal with the cold. "We'll have a devil of a time finding it."

"Oh not so bad. We'll pump in warm air—"

"And then?"

"Well, there's a leak. As soon as the air hits the vacuum the water vapor condenses. So we look for a little jet of steam."

Paskell said in a precise voice, "There's no leak."

"No? Then why—"

"We never turned on the heat. The air inside liquefied."

Milke turned away to look out over the lake. Paskell quietly plugged in the cord; power circulated through elements meshed into the tent fabric.

Milke turned back, slapping his gloves together. "That's about all we can do until the air thaws out . . ." He looked at Paskell, who again was standing as if listening. Irritably he asked, "What's the matter now?"

Paskell made a furtive motion toward the ground. Milke looked intently down.

Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump.

"Three-legged Joe," whispered Paskell.

Milke looked hurriedly in all directions. "There can't be anything out there." He turned. Paskell had disappeared.

"Oliver! Where are you?"

"I'm in the ship," came a calm voice.

Milke backed slowly toward the port. Night had come to Odfars; starlight shone on the quicksilver lake, intensified by the booster goggles to near the power of moonlight. Was that a black shadow standing in the defile? Milke hurriedly backed against the port.

It was locked. He pounded against the metal. "Hey, Oliver, open up!"

He looked over his shoulder. The black shape seemed to have moved forward.

PASKELL came to the port, looked carefully out past Milke, threw back the bolts. Milke burst into the air-chamber, on into the ship. He took off his helmet. "What's the idea locking me

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out? Suppose that damn whatever it is was hot on my tail?"

Paskell said in a practical voice, "Well we'd hardy want him inside the ship, would we?"

Milke roared, "If he got me first I wouldn't care whether he got into the ship or not." He jumped up into the central dome, played the searchlight around the lake. Paskell watched from the sideport. "See anything?"

"No," grumbled Milke. "I still don't believe there's anything out there. Let's eat dinner and get some sleep."

"Perhaps we should keep watch."

"What do we watch for? What good would it do if we saw something?"

Paskell shrugged. "We might be able to deal with it, if we knew what it was."

Milke said, "If there *is* anything out there—" he slapped the holster at his belt, "I'll know how to deal with it . . . A couple ammo into its hide and we'll have to screen for its pieces."

The ship vibrated; from the tail came a harsh sound. The floor jarred under their feet. Milke looked askance at Paskell, who puffed rather desperately at his pipe. Milke ran back to the searchlight. But the central dome interrupted the backward path of the beam and the tail was left in darkness.

"I can't see a thing," fretted Milke. He jumped down to the deck, looked indecisively at the after port.

The vibrations ceased. Milke squared his shoulders, pulled the helmet back over his head. Slowly Paskell followed suit.

"You bring a flashlight," said Milke. "I'll have my gun ready . . ."

They stepped into the air lock. Paskell gingerly thrust his arm out, aimed the light toward the tent. "Nothing there," grumbled Milke. He pushed past Paskell, stepped down to the ground. Paskell followed, played the light in a circle.

"Whatever it was, it's gone," grunted Milke. "It heard us coming—"

"Look," whispered Paskell.

It was no more than a zig-zag of shadows, a moving mass.

Milke held out his arm; his gun spat pale blue sparks. Explosion—a great splash of orange light. "Got him!" cried Milke exultantly. "Dead center!"

Their eyes adjusted to the pallid illumination of the flashlight. Nothing but the glistening sheen of the quicksilver and—a rumpled tumbled mess where the assay tent had stood.

Milke said in an outrage too deep for vehemence, "He's ruined our gear—our tent!"

"Look out!" screamed Paskell. The flashlight took lunatic sweeps over the lake. Milke sent shot after shot at a tall shape; the explosions smote back on their suits; the orange glare blinded their eyes.

Thud-bump . . . Thud-bump . . . "Inside!" gasped Milke. "Inside, we can't hold him off . . ."

The outer port slammed. A breathless moment later the hull jarred, scraped along the quicksilver. Milke and Paskell stood haunted and pale in the center of the deck.

Metal creaked at the stern under pressure or torsion. Milke's voice came high-pitched. "We're not built to take that kind of stuff—"

The boat lurched to the side. Paskell put his pipe in his pocket, grabbed a stanchion. Milke jumped up to the controls. "We'd better get out of here."

Paskell cleared his throat. "Wait, I think it's stopped."

The boat was quiet. Milke thought of the searchlight, flicked the switch. "Hah!"

"What is it?"

Milke stared out the port. He said slowly, "I really don't know. Something like a one-legged man on crutches . . . That's how he walks."

"Is he big?"

"Yes," said Milke. "Rather big . . . I think he's gone, through that fissure—" He came down to the deck, split open his space suit, climbed nervously out. "That was Three-legged Joe.

Paskell took a sudden seat on the bunk, reached for his pipe. "Quite an im-

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pressive fellow."

Milke laughed shortly. "I can certainly understand how he scared the bejabbers out of those old bindlestiffs."

"Yes," Paskell nodded earnestly. "I can too." He lit his pipe, puffed reflectively. "He can't be invulnerable . . ."

Milke dropped leadenly upon his own bunk. "We'll get him—somehow or other."

Paskell craned his neck out the port. "There'll be light in a few hours . . . I suppose we might as well sleep."

"Yes," said Milke. "If Three-legged Joe comes back, I imagine he'll let us know about it."

SIGMA SCULPTORIS washed the quicksilver lake with the palest of lights. Milke and Paskell glumly examined the wreckage of the assay tent.

Milke's indignation brimmed over the restraints he had set upon himself. He clenched his fists inside the gloves, glared toward the defile. "I'd like to lay my hands on that three-legged devil . . ."

Paskell busied himself among the tatters of the tent. "Nothing but ribbons."

Milke said gloomily, "No use to think about mending it . . .". He watched Paskell curiously. "What are you looking for?"

"I wonder what possessed him to break into the tent."

"Sheer destructiveness."

Paskell said thoughtfully, "I notice one thing—" he paused.

"What?"

"All our reagents are gone."

Milke bent over the wreckage. "All of them?"

"All the acids. All the bases. He left distilled water, the salts. . . ."

"Hm," said Milke. "What do you make of that?"

Paskell shrugged inside his suit. "It's suggestive."

"Of what, if I may ask?"

"I'm not sure." Paskell wandered out over the quicksilver, searching the surface. "He was about here when you shot at him?"

"Just about."

Paskell bent. "Look here." He held up a rough brownish-gray object the size of his thumb. "Here's a piece of Three-legged Joe."

Milke examined the fragment. "If this is all those pellets did to him—he's tough. This stuff is flexible!"

Paskell took back the fragment. "Let's take it in and run it through the works."

They returned into the ship. Paskell clamped the bit in a vise and after exasperating difficulty, succeeded in slicing free a brittle shaving. He forced it flat between a slide and a cover glass, examined it under the microscope. "Remarkable."

"Let's see." Milke applied his eye. "Hm . . . it's like a carpet—woven in three dimensions."

"Right. No matter which way you cut or tear, fibers mat up against you . . . now let's see what he's made of."

"You're the technician," said Milke.

PASKELL looked up from the work bench an hour later. "It's a very complex silicon compound. The spectroscope shows silicon, lithium, fluorine, oxygen, iron, sulfur, selenium, but I can't begin to put a name to the stuff."

"Call it Joe-hide," Milke suggested.

Paskell blew into his pipe, looked solemnly down at the workbench. "I have a tentative theory about Joe's inner workings. . . ."

"Well?"

"Obviously he needs energy to exist. His hide shows no radioactivity, so he must use chemical energy. At least I can't think of any other form of energy that he could be using."

Milke frowned. "Chemical energy? At absolute zero?"

"He's insulated. No telling how high his internal temperature goes."

"What kind of chemical energy? There's no free oxygen, no fluorine, nothing. . . ."

"Presumably he uses whatever he can get—anything that reacts to produce energy."

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Milke pounded his fist into his hand. "We could bait him into a trap, with, say, a chunk of solid oxygen!"

"I should certainly think so. But what kind of trap?"

Milke scowled. "A dead-fall."

"Here on Odfars gravity is not too strong . . . we'd have to stack ten thousand cubic yards of rock to make an impression."

Milke paced up and down the room. "I've got it!"

"Well?" said Paskell mildly.

"Perhaps you could make a detonator that we could set off from the ship."

"I should think so."

"Here's what we'll do. We'll set out about twenty pounds of myradyne, with the detonator in the center. Joe will come past, tuck this bundle into whatever kind of stomach he's got. We wait till he gets a few hundred yards from the ship, then set it off."

Paskell pursed his lips. "If events proceeded along those lines, everything would be fine."

"Well, why shouldn't they? You claim that Joe eats—"

"Not 'claim'—'theorize.'"

"—anything that produces energy. Well, the myradyne should look to him like ice cream and candy and cake all mixed up. It's nothing else *but* energy."

"It's a different kind of energy—the energy of instability. Perhaps he only digests energy of combination."

"You're quibbling," said Milke with disgust. "I say the idea's worth trying."

Paskell shrugged. "Get out your myradyne."

"How long will it take you to fix up a detonator?"

"Twenty minutes. I'll hook up a battery and a spare head-set to the cartridge. . . ."

WHILE Milke gingerly carried the packet of explosive across the lake, Paskell stood by the port watching. Milke surveyed the landscape with fine calculation, setting down the packet, moving it a few yards to the right, another few yards toward the defile. Finally satisfied, he looked back to Paskell for approval. Paskell signaled casually, and his hand fell against the detonation switch. He looked out toward Milke, hastily jumped into his suit, let himself through the port, ran across the lake.

Milke asked, "What's the trouble?"

Paskell said, "That remote control detonator doesn't work. I'd better take a look at it."

Milke stared at him truculently. "How do you know it doesn't work?"

Paskell made a vague gesture, knelt beside the packet, unfolded the wrapping.

"You couldn't have just sensed it," Milke insisted.

"Well, as a matter of fact, my hand accidentally hit the switch, and it didn't go off—so I thought I'd better run out and see what was wrong."

Milke seemed to sink inside his suit. For a moment there was silence. "Ah," said Paskell. "Nothing very serious; I neglected to clip down the battery leads . . . now it's ready to go—"

"I'm going back to the ship," said Milke thickly.

Paskell glanced up toward Sigma Sculptoris. "Yes, there's only a few moments of daylight left . . ."

Inside the ship, without the booster goggles, night apparently had already come to the quicksilver lake.

Milke roused himself from his bunk where he had been quietly sitting, took his goggles, went up into the control blister. "Nothing in sight."

Paskell said mildly, "Maybe Joe won't be back."

Milke, with his back to Paskell, said nothing.

"Maybe he's been watching us all day," Paskell remarked.

Milke leaned forward. "There's something moving in the gulch . . . there goes the daylight. Blast it! Now I can't see anything. . . . and the dome's in the way of the searchlight again."

In sudden inspiration Paskell said, "Use the radar!"

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Milke ran to the screen, flipped some switches, set the key on Green, short range. Paskell swung around the antenna. "Hold it!" said Milke. "Right there!"

Paskell and Milke bent close to the screen. The plane of the lake, the bulk of the mountains, the gap were all clear. Three-legged Joe, much closer, was a blur. "Can't you adjust it finer?" demanded Paskell.

Milke ran to the work bench, came back with a screw-driver, set the Green adjustment to its limit. "How's that?"

"Turn off the lights. I feel like I'm in a peep-show."

"There, any better?"

"Yes, much better."

Milke came back to the screen. Three-legged Joe was a barrel surmounted by a keg. The legs were a blur; flickering wisps of light to either side of the trunk seemed to indicate arm-members.

"Look," sighed Milke. "He's stopping by the package."

The great trunk seemed to waver, collapse.

"He's reaching for it."

The shape once more reached its full height.

"He's stopped," said Paskell.

"He's eating the myradyne. . . ."

THREE-LEGGED JOE came forward, and presently blurred out past the resolving power of the set.

The ship jerked tentatively. Milke and Paskell braced themselves. Nothing more. Silence. The radar screen was empty. Paskell swivelled the antenna. Nothing.

"He's gone," said Milke. "Where's the detonator switch?"

"Wait!" Paskell whispered. He turned on the lights. "Look!"

Milke jerked back. Pressed close to the port beside his face was a rough silvery brown-gray substance.

The port suddenly showed black. A flicker of movement passed the stern port.

"Off with the lights," hissed Milke. "Back to the radar."

A blur of golden light resolved into an ambling barrel and keg.

"Now," said Milke, "press the button! Quick! Before he gets out of range."

"Just a moment," said Paskell. "Suppose he's smarter than we think?"

"No time for theorizing now," cried Milke. "Where's the button?"

Paskell pushed him away stubbornly. "First we'd better take a look around." He climbed into his space suit while Milke fumed and ranted.

Taking no heed, Paskell left the ship. Out the port Milke could see the glimmer of his head lamp.

The outside port sighed open, thudded shut. Paskell came back into the ship. Milke had his finger on the switch. Paskell, unable to talk through the helmet, banged his glove against the wall. In his other hand he held up a brown packet.

Milke's fingers fell nervously away.

Paskell split himself out of the suit. "I didn't think he'd like myradyne," he said in modest triumph. "The wrong kind of chemical energy. He left it beside the ship."

"Gad!" said Milke huskily. "Twice on the same day I'm blown to smithereens. . . ."

Paskell carefully removed the detonator. "Every day we're learning more about Three-legged Joe."

Milke's voice was warm with emotion. "Every day we come closer to killing ourselves."

"Tomorrow," said Paskell, "we'll try again."

OVER a cup of hot coffee Milke asked, "How do you mean, try again? So far as I can see, we're licked. Our guns are no good, he refuses to eat our explosives. Certainly nothing in the world could poison him."

"True." Paskell tamped black shag into his pipe. "The methods for killing human beings don't apply to Three-legged Joe."

"No wonder those old goats at Merlin-

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ville gave us the laugh."

Paskell puffed thoughtfully. "If we could concentrate enough heat on Joe, for a long enough time—"

"Nuts!" said Milke. "If we had an ocean we couldn't even drown him."

Paskell said through the cloud of smoke. "If we melted a puddle in the quicksilver and he fell in, and the quicksilver froze around him—"

"Impossible, Quicksilver at absolute zero is super-conductive. We'd have to heat half the planet."

"Super-conductive . . . Right. So it is." Paskell stared dreamily into the haze. "I wonder how far the quicksilver extends around the planet?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Maybe we'll electrocute Joe."

"Jah!" spat Milke. "With what? Our two thousand-watt generator?"

Paskell said, "First we'll have to check on the quicksilver."

"On foot? With Joe pounding along behind us, breathing down our necks?"

Paskell said carelessly, "I imagine we can move as fast as Joe."

"I'm not sure. Maybe he runs like a greyhound."

"We'll have our guns."

"Fat lot of good they do."

"Well—I suppose we could take up our ship and cruise around the planet. In fact it might be better. . . ."

His companion had been completely absorbed in his theorizing when Milke called out in alarm, "You're sitting down almost in that defile!"

"Good," said Paskell. "We want to have the ship as near to the gap as possible."

"I don't see why," Milke said petulantly. "In fact I don't understand what you're up to."

"We're planning to electrocute Three-legged Joe," said Paskell patiently. "We've been around the planet; we've established that the quicksilver is interconnected everywhere except at this fifty foot saddle of gray chalk. We've got enough lead and copper aboard to bridge the gap with a fairly heavy cable—which we will do. We can melt a good connection into the quicksilver with thermite."

"So then?"

"While you're installing the cable, I'll be rigging up some kind of fancy induction coil to take power from our generator and building up watts in the round-planet circuit."

Milke stared incredulously at Paskell. "What good will that do?"

"You'll arrange the cable so that when Joe comes along the defile, he'll have to take hold of the cable to break it. As soon as he does so—he gets everything that we've been feeding into the circuit."

Milke shook his head. "It won't work."

Paskell puffed at his pipe. "And why not, pray?"

"Think of the hysteresis in all those miles of quicksilver—the inlets and bays and channels. There'll be a billion little whorls and eddies. . . ."

"There's no energy lost," said Paskell. "There's no resistance, so there can't be any production of heat."

"There'll be field conflicts," insisted Milke.

"Only for a few hundredths of a second. After that the fields will necessarily enforce a flow pattern that minimizes the impedance."

Milke shook his head. "I hope you know what you're talking about . . . But—" he raised a finger "—we've got another problem."

"What's that?"

"The planet's natural magnetism. If we start current flowing around the planet, we're setting up artificial north and south poles. We'll be fighting the natural field."

Paskell blinded owlishly. "There is no natural field to this planet. I checked immediately."

Milke threw up his hands. "Go to it, Oliver. It's your party."

MILKE and Paskell stood contemplating the defile, across which, at the height of their eyes, dangled a rude cable. Near the lake, the cable passed

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through a long box, from which came leads running to the generator inside the ship.

Paskell said solemnly, "There's a trillion amps running through that cable."

"A few more," said Milke, "it'll swell like a poisoned pup."

"There is a practical limit," admitted Paskell. "At absolute zero the resistance of super-conductive metals is infinitesimal, but still is greater than nothing. When the cable carries a load that generates heat faster than the heat radiates off, the temperature in the cable rises until it reaches the lower limit of super-conductivity."

"And then?"

Paskell flung up his arms. "No more cable."

Milke regarded his handiwork anxiously. "Perhaps we'd better check."

"How? We don't have a thermocouple aboard that sensitive."

Milke shrugged. "All we can do then is hope."

"Right. Hope that Joe comes down that pass before the cable goes." He looked up at the sun. "Still an hour or two of light."

Milke said doubtfully, "The set-up doesn't look very lethal. Suppose Joe grabs the cable and breaks it, and nothing happens—what then?"

"Something's got to happen. We're feeding a constant two thousand watts into that circuit. When Joe breaks the cable those watts have to go somewhere—they just don't evaporate. They keep on going—through Joe. And if Joe doesn't feel it, I'll personally go after him with a pocket-knife."

Milke turned Paskell a surprised glance: strong talk from modest Oliver Paskell.

Paskell was restlessly beating his hands together. "We're forgetting something."

Milke turned, looked toward the ship.

"Ah, yes," said Paskell.

Milke made a strange noise. His arm jerked up.

"The bait," said Paskell. "We want to set out some acid."

"Never mind the bait," rasped Milke. "We're the bait . . . Joe's behind us. . . ."

Paskell sprang around. Three-legged Joe stood in front of the ship looking at them.

"Run," said Milke. "Up under the cable . . . And if it doesn't work—God help us. . . ."

Three-legged Joe came forward, like a one-legged man on crutches.

Paskell stood frozen. "Run!" screamed Milke. He darted back, seized Paskell's arm.

Paskell broke into a shambling run.

"Faster," panted Milke. "He's gaining on us."

Paskell ran to the mountain side, tried to claw his way up the sheer rock.

"No, no!" yelled Milke. "Through the defile!"

Paskell turned, lurched under one of Joe's arms, scuttled toward the defile.

Milke tackled him. "Under the cable—not through! *Under!*" He desperately grabbed Paskell's legs, drew him under the cable. Three-legged Joe ambled casually after.

Paskell rose to his feet, looked wildly around. "Easy," said Milke. "Easy . . ."

Cautiously they backed up the defile. Milke panted, "No use running now. If your contraption doesn't work, we might as well reconcile ourselves to death."

Paskell asked suddenly. "Did you turn on the generator?"

Milke froze. "The generator? Inside the ship? You mean the power out to the circuit?"

"Yes, the generator. . . ."

"No, didn't you?"

"I don't remember."

Milke said despairingly, "You'll know in a minute. Here comes Joe—"

Three-legged Joe paused by the cable. He walked forward. The cable touched his chest. He lifted up his arms. "Close your eyes," cried Paskell.

The sudden glare spattered darts of light through their eyelids.

"You turned on the generator," said Milke.

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Three-legged Joe lay forty feet distant, twitching feebly.

"He's not dead," muttered Paskell.

Milke stood looking down at the silver-gray hulk. "We can't cut him up. We can't tie him. We can't. . . ."

Paskell ran to the ship. "Get out the grapples."

RETURNING from the Merlinville Deed Office, Milke and Paskell stepped into Tom Hand's Chandlery for a new assay tent and a replacement set of reagents.

Lounging at the table were Abel Cooley and his friend James. "Here's the prospectors back from Odfars," said Cooley.

Tom Hand limped forward. His eyes were red, there was alcohol on his breath, and a series of black and blue bruises showed on one side of his face. "Well, young fellow," he said to Milke in a thick voice, "what'll it be?"

"First, we need a new assay tent."

From the table by the window came a chuckle. James called out in his jocular baritone, "Three-legged Joe maybe tried to bunk in with you?"

Milke made a non-committal gesture; Paskell sucked at his pipe.

Tom Hand said, "Pick up the tent out on the loading platform. What else?"

"We need a set of assay reagents." Milke handed over a list.

Tom Hand looked at them from under his eyebrows. "You boys still going out prospecting?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"I should think maybe you had a belly-full."

Milke shrugged. "Odfars wasn't too bad. We never expected an easy life from prospecting. Joe gave us a pretty hard time, but we took care of him."

Hand leaned forward, red eyes blinking. "What's that?"

"We don't mind letting it out. We've got everything in sight sewed up and recorded."

Abel Cooley said, "You took care of Joe, did you? Talk him to death, maybe?"

"No. He's still alive. We've got him where he can't get away. A research team from the Biological Institute is coming out to look him over."

James stepped forward. "You've got him where he can't get away? I've seen Joe break out of a net of two inch cable like it was string. We blasted a mountain down on top of his cave. Twenty minutes later he pushes his way out. . . . Now you tell me you've got him where he can't get away."

"Right," murmured Paskell. "Exactly right."

Milke turned to Tom Hand. "Give us about a hundred gallons of hydrogen peroxide, two hundred gallons of alcohol."

"We've got to keep Joe alive," Paskell told James.

Abel Cooley snorted. "Hogwash."

Tom Hand shrugged, turned away into the recesses of his shop.

James said, in an oil-smooth voice, "Suppose you break down and tell us just what you did to poor old Three-legged Joe."

"Why not?" said Paskell. "But I'm warning you—stay away from him."

"Never mind the jokes . . . I'm still listening."

"Well, first we electrocuted Joe. It stunned him."

"Yeah?"

"We couldn't kill him or tie him—so while he was still twitching, we threw grapples around his leg, hoisted him twenty miles out into space and gave him an orbit around Odfars. That's where he is now—alive and well and feeling rather foolish, I should imagine."

James pulled at his chin. He looked at Abel Cooley. "What do you think, Abel?" he asked.

Abel Cooley snorted, looked out the window.

James sat down by the table. "Yes," he said heavily, "Three-legged Joe *is* feeling rather foolish, I expect."

"About like the rest of you birds," came Tom Hand's voice from behind the shelves.

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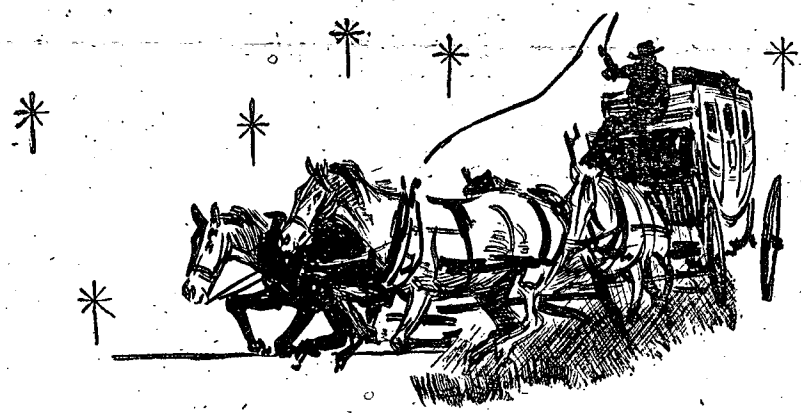

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OVERDRIVE

I

THE space-tramp came out of overdrive again and began to let down to the surface of the planet below it. Its communicators sent a beamed request to land, the regular formality. There was no answer.

It descended steadily, repeating its identification and request, and adding that it had Earth-seeds, art-objects, heavy metals and dairy animals on board for trading. There was still no reply.

It was surely the right planet. The sun was surely Procus. This was the second planet out from the local sun, Procus II. There were cities on its surface, plainly visible through the electron telescope. But there was no reply to the beamed, formal message from the space-tramp.

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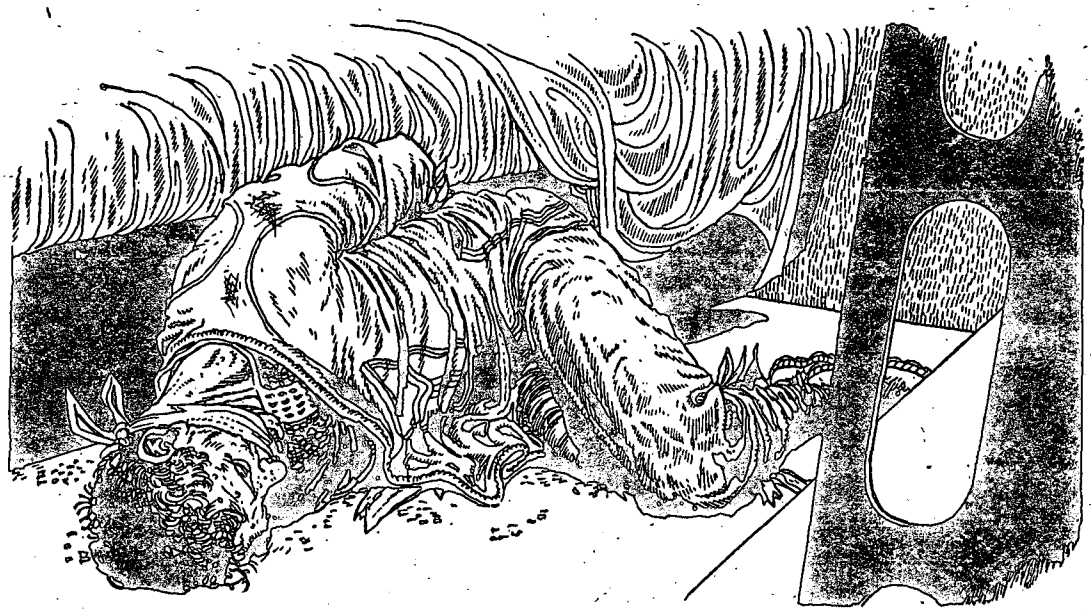
He was one man against mutiny—

with only the secret of his skill

to match the weapons of the aliens. . . .

Rudl was gagged and bound with bed-clothing



a novelet by MURRAY LEINSTER

It went into atmosphere and its communicators searched the wave-bands of atmospheric radio for messages. There were no radio messages in the atmosphere—nothing but static. But cultivated fields could be seen, and highways, and a city almost below.

The space-tramp hovered over the city, hunting the space-port. It descended to within thousands of feet. But it did not land. Telescopes showed the city motionless. Ground-vehicles stood still in its streets. Nothing moved anywhere. With greater magnification, there were bodies to be seen, sprawled out and still. Then it could be seen that there had been fighting. There were signs of explosions. And then it could be seen that the city had been looted . . . unmistakably, it had been looted. . . .

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The space-tramp shot skyward in panic. Instantly it was out of atmosphere it winked into overdrive to get away from there.

Procus II was the fourth planet to be discovered with all its cities looted and its entire population murdered. . . .

JIM BRENT woke up when the *Delilah's* overdrive field went off ahead of time. A space-liner's overdrive goes on and stays on. A liner goes from one place to another place, on schedule, and there is no nonsense about it. The *Delilah* was en route from Khem IV to Loren II, and it had been in overdrive for two weeks and it should have stayed in overdrive for two weeks more. But the drive went off and Brent woke up. Anybody would. His stomach turned over twice, and he was swallowing hard as he struggled dizzily to a sitting position. He hung to the sides of his bunk as the universe went into that dizzy, diminishing spiral which ended in a fraction of a second but felt like hours. Then he opened his eyes. Instantly, he thought of the girl named Kit.

A voice said soothingly from the speaker in the ceiling of his cabin:

"There is no immediate cause for alarm. Stay calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. There is no need to be alarmed. This is a well-found ship with a thoroughly trained crew, and we are in communication with our base. There is no occasion for uneasiness."

Brent heard every word, and a cold chill began at the base of his spine and went up, vertebra by vertebra, to chill the back of his skull, and then went deliberately down the ladder of his backbone again. The words from the speaker were soothing, but the message was one to chill the blood. For one thing, the voice lied. It spoke of communication with the *Delilah's base.* That was lie number one. It said there was no reason to be disturbed. That was lie number two and on up to infinity. Liners did not cut their overdrives in mid-voyage. If and when an overdrive went off —and was lied about—everybody on board the ship was dead. Automatically. But unfortunately they didn't act dead.

Brent waited, feeling sick inside. Then he got up stiffly from his bunk. He put on his clothes. There was no port in his cabin, of course. In overdrive there is nothing to be seen anyhow except out the bow, control-room ports. Overdrive is travel at the speed of light multiplied many times—the multiplier depending on the type of drive.

For almost two centuries humanity had nothing faster than interplanetary drive, and was confined to its home solar system in consequence, because from Sol to its nearest neighbor was four and a half light-years, which would have taken centuries to travel. On overdrive, nowadays, a freighter makes it in a week and a crack liner in a fraction of that time. But they do it in overdrive. Overdrive! If the overdrive goes, the trip is finished. Period.

Brent parted his hair carefully before he went out of his cabin. It was quite absurd. He was thinking. *The overdrive's blown. I've got to look after that girl.* It was a curious thing to think, because he was of the Profession, and besides, she had never spoken to him.

He knew that her name was Kit Harlow, and that she was wonderfully pleasing to look at. But there had been a reason for not trying to make her acquaintance. Some very strange things had happened. A planet named Derik had been discovered, most unexpectedly, to have all its cities filled with skeletons and all its treasures looted. Another planet named Tren III was found to have all its citizens rotting in the streets of its looted cities.

Four widely-separated planets, in all, had been discovered with their entire populations killed. Two had been painstakingly looted of every valuable which men with unlimited transportation could wish to carry away. And it had been Brent's errand—being of the Pro-

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fession—to try to find out how all this had come about. Naturally, he had not thought of getting acquainted with girls, however pretty.

NOW, though, all bets were off. If the *Delilah's* overdrive was blown, nobody had any profession or business or obligations of any sort that reached outside the ship. Nothing anybody did would have any effect, or any meaning, to anybody not on the ship at the same time with him. The *Delilah* was, at the moment, very stodgy and respectable. But presently it would be a first-class

NOT much can be said about Murray Leinster, the author of OVERDRIVE, that hasn't been said before. The man whom LIFE called "the dean of science-fiction writers" has had such a long and distinguished career of imaginative thinking that it surprises people meeting him for the first time to find out how young he is. Which is good; there is still more ahead of him than past.

—The Editor

imitation of hell. Brent's Professional status was gone and all his obligations with it. It occurred to him that the most useful thing he could do would be to explain the situation to Kit Harlow and offer, politely, to kill her before things got too bad.

He didn't have to think the situation out. In overdrive, an antique ship like this—modern ships did vastly better—would cover a light-year of distance in a week of time. Light travels a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second. In eight minutes it travels ninety-two millions of miles. In a day it travels so far that the distance has no meaning. In a year . . . it travels the distance the *Delilah* should cover in a week. If a ship's overdrive went off—any ship's overdrive—and where it went off was known, still it would take ten thousand other space-ships ten thousand years to hunt for it with one chance in ten thousand of finding it.

Nobody ever hunted for a ship that vanished in overdrive. It was useless. If the crew couldn't fix whatever was wrong, it wouldn't get fixed. So far, in two thousand years of interstellar navigation, just two ships had been found after their overdrives blew. Each had drifted into a planetary system by pure chance. One had been lost a century and a half when it was discovered. The other had been missing for eight hundred years. Both were blessedly empty of life when they were found—of course—but both showed plain signs of what had happened inside them before life went. Madness was only part of it—the smallest, least, and cleanest part of it.

When human beings found themselves imprisoned for always in a metal coffin lost among derisive stars, they ceased to be human. Their food and air would last only so long. They had no hope at all. So the humans in a ship with a blown overdrive went mad. They didn't stop at being beasts. They seemed to find new depths to sink to before the last of them died in gibbering idiocy.

I wonder if there are arms on board, thought Brent. The crew could wipe out the rest of us. Best thing, too.

His mind went back to the girl. Such a pretty girl! She was traveling with her father, who was an Earth Commerce Commissioner and a Very Important Person indeed. They'd been on Khem IV while Brent was there. He'd seen them with a pattering escort of secret-service men. But Brent had been busy finding out nothing at all. Khem IV was a thinly-settled planet with a savagely totalitarian government, but he'd found no indications of Professional interest. He'd merely been trailed everywhere by unskilled detectives. It was pure coincidence that Kit and Brent traveled on the same ship to Loren II.

I wish she'd missed this ship, thought Brent numbly. It didn't occur to him to wish that he'd missed it.

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The speaker in the ceiling repeated:

"There is no cause for alarm. Be calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. We are in communication with our base. There is no need for uneasiness."

It occurred to Brent that it was very foolish to keep repeating that message. It would not reassure anybody. Anyone who knew anything would know it was a lie. The more it was insisted upon, the more frightened the passengers would become.

II

HE OPENED the door of his cabin and went out. His door opened on the main lounge. It was full of the *Delilah's* passengers. He'd never seen so many of them at once before. There were some children. They were playing. There was a woman with a painted, empty face. She smiled fixedly, but her eyes were filled with horror. There was a man and a girl—honeymooners, Brent had thought. The girl was chalky-white, and her young husband's eyes were burning as he looked at the other passengers. He was already prepared to kill anybody to defend her. To get her food. To have air for her to breathe . . . there were many faces that had been ruddy in color and now were a curious grayish tint.

Brent looked at the girl he'd thought of first. He moved toward her. A man clutched his arm and babbled:

"Look here! They say—they say the ship's in touch with home. Do you—think that's so?"

Brent nodded.

"Oh, surely!" he said untruthfully. "They have a new faster-than-light communication system. All ships have it now. We'll be all right."

The man gasped in relief.

"You're sure? Positive?" Then he began to laugh foolishly. "Then it's all right! It's all right!"

Brent moved on. It would be wonderful if it were true, he thought sourly to himself. Now was no time to refuse a comforting lie to someone who needed it.

Jim frowned to himself: There was something in the back of his mind that was trying to come out. But his head wasn't working just right.

Nobody's mind is clear when filled with the numbing knowledge that he is absolutely helpless against absolutely certain doom. Of course the *Delilah* wasn't in communication with anybody or anything. Radiation is propagated at the speed of light, only. If a message-beam could be held tight enough, and if enough power could be put into it, and if it were aimed straight enough—why—a liner like the *Delilah* could send a message back to Khem IV, from which it had departed two weeks before. But the message would take two years to get back. More, it wasn't likely to hit. The sun Khem had a proper motion, which might be anything from fifteen to three hundred miles a second in any direction. The light from it showed it where it had been two years before. A beam would have to be aimed where it would be two years hence. And even then the beam would hardly hit Khem IV in its orbit. No. The *Delilah* could never get a message back to its base. That was out of the question.

We're dead, thought Brent morbidly, all of us. Only we haven't started to act like it yet.

Before they did act dead, things would happen it was not pleasant to anticipate.

He stopped beside the girl, Kit Harlow. She and her father were standing by themselves, looking at the other passengers. Their expressions were peculiar. It wasn't that they didn't know what the blown overdrive meant, but that they were taking it in their own way.

"Pardon," said Brent. "I'm Jim Brent. I think you know what's happened. I—saw you back in port and I'm traveling by myself. Things will be bad presently. I thought I'd offer—"

The girl looked at him detachedly.

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Her father said harshly:

"You thought you'd offer what?"

He saw a bitter anger in the older man's eyes. And then Brent realized what the other man was thinking. He flushed angrily.

"We are dead," he said coldly. "You know it. You know what's likely to happen as these people go mad. I intended to offer to help keep things decent for her for so long as it can be managed. I happen to be a fool, and I meant to offer to act like one."

WITH that he turned away, frustrated, bitter. They'd thought he meant something very different. Reasonable enough, at that. Some men, knowing that nothing can make what is coming any worse. . . .

"Just a moment," said the girl.

He turned back. Her voice was just what he'd thought it would be. Clear, and level, and good to listen to. She smiled faintly at him.

"Thank you very much. If you can organize some other passengers, you may be able to prevent some horrors—for a while."

Her father said bitterly:

"I doubt it. That might make things worse. After all, the loudspeakers may have spoken the truth. The overdrive may only be turned off. It may not be blown."

Brent shook his head as if to clear it. He wasn't thinking very straight, and he knew it. Nobody does, immediately after discovering that he cannot have any possible hope. Kit said sharply:

"You really think that?"

"I've been thinking it out," said her father bitterly. "You know what happened where we were! It would be most indiscreet to murder me in any ordinary way. Or you." Then he said harshly, "This young man had better not talk to us."

The girl caught her breath. She went paler.

"I hadn't thought of that!" Then she turned to Brent and said quietly, "My father is right. We do not think this—accident is just what it seems. There will be confusion and horror, of course. People will go mad, and people will be killed. We—will be among those killed. But we think that—ultimately the overdrive will be repaired. Probably, when it is repaired, the ship will go back to Khem IV."

Brent still could not think very straight. His mind was possessed by the horrors which could be anticipated.

"But—you can do us a very great favor," said the girl. She moistened her lips and looked at her father. He nodded. "It is—very important. Much more important than my father's life or mine. Will you try?"

Brent had been carefully trained to think clearly in emergencies, but this was not an emergency. It still seemed to him pure disaster. There was nothing for his mind to take hold of, to think about.

"First," said Kit, very pale, "you mustn't talk to us again. Don't avoid us conspicuously, but—especially don't try to keep us from being killed. That's necessary."

Brent tried to listen, with the back of his mind trying to tell him something that fitted in.

"Then," said Kit composedly, "when you get back to Earth, go to the Commerce Commission and find someone who knows my father. Tell him exactly what happened to my father and me, and say that we think it happened because the planet ruler of Khem IV had *vistek* served at a state banquet by mistake. It was served to us. *Vistek.* V-I-S-T-E-K. It was a mistake. He had his cooks executed for the mistake. And—we couldn't be murdered in any ordinary fashion. That's the message."

She looked again at her father. Again he nodded.

"That's all," she said. "You can't do any more for us. And you can't do that if you are known to be friendly to us. Now please don't talk to either of us again."

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She turned away and her father turned with her. As they moved off, a voice panted in Brent's ear:

"He's an important man! What'd he say? He's Earth Commissioner of Commerce! He'd know all the inside! What'd he say?"

IT WAS a pimply-faced man named Rudl, who, during the first two weeks of the voyage, had thrust himself into every gathering, talked to every individual passenger, and had succeeded in making a general nuisance of himself. Brent said briefly:

"He said just what the loudspeaker said. That we're in touch with base and if there's any trouble a rescue-ship will come to take us off this ship."

Again it was untrue, but panic would come soon enough. The pimply Rudl whimpered:

"They can't! They couldn't get word back, and they couldn't find us if they knew we were lost! They couldn't—"

Brent was irritated, but the man was right. A ship's communicators have an extreme, overload dot-dash range of six light-minutes. A ship coming out of overdrive after a two-light-year run is rarely within a light-day of its intended position, either in distance or in direction. A rescue-ship trying to find the *Delilah*—but there could be no rescue-ship—could not know the *Delilah's* error of position or its own. It would be extraordinary if it stopped within two hundred and fifty times the distance at which two ships can contact each other. To search a globe of such size would be utterly impossible.

But Brent said savagely:

"You fool! Do you want to start a panic by babbling like that? Go talk to a ship's officer! Ask him!"

Rudl stumbled away. Brent clenched his hands. Kit's father was an important man. He was too important a man to be murdered in any ordinary way without great repercussions. But why should anybody want to murder him? Why should a ship pretend that its overdrive was blown, and then repaired, simply to arrange for the death of a man and a girl at the hands of fear-crazed passengers? And the message they wanted him to give— What was that about?

Brent wanted to think. All unconsciously he was beginning to think like a member of The Profession, though he was no longer under any obligation to do so. He was, if the *Delilah's* overdrive was blown, as free of all obligations and duties and all need to think of the consequences of his acts as a man in a coffin six feet underground. If the drive was blown, he *was* in a coffin midway between suns!

He went to the *Delilah's* bar. There were a dozen passengers already in it. Brent saw one of them furtively filling his pockets with snack-packets. A bad sign—a man preparing to hoard food against his fellows.

Brent ordered a drink of *sarfane,* and the bartender served him. He sipped his drink—and froze. *Sarfane* was a light drink, and ordinarily delicious. It could not be mixed with anything else, though, or its flavor was spoiled. Something had obviously been mixed with this.

He sat very still. *This is quick!* he thought. If the *Delilah's* officers knew the ship's situation was hopeless, it would be reasonable to have served drinks doctored with sedative. The more unstable passengers, who would crack up first, would be the first to drink. If drugged, they would grow sleepy instead of desperate. That would make sense. But it had not been twenty minutes since the overdrive went off. *Quick action,* Brent thought. *Too quick! Much too quick!*

It was.

III

EVERY six months a liner from the Caldarian planets landed on Luxor V. Only twenty light-years apart, the light-metal planets found a perfect comple-

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mentary economic system in Luxor V. A brisk exchange of agricultural products was only matched by the swapping of lithium and magnesium for bismuth, thorium and uranium, and there was equally friendly interchange of inhabitants.

The liner *Caldaria* had full holds of commercial goods and passengers. The liner came down gently, signalling its arrival and with its communicator teletyping out a list of passengers and its invoice even before touching ground.

An explosive shell hit its nose just as the descent was checked because of the suddenly-realized absence of any response. The shell shattered the control-room and all possibility of navigating the huge ship. Other shells smashed into it. It went reeling to the ground with huge gashes in its sides.

Only when there was no possibility of its rising again did any movement show around the edges of the landing-field. Then ground vehicles came briskly toward it to examine it for salvageable loot. Men from the ground vehicles began to cut their way into the wrecked ship, also, to see if by any chance any personable women had survived its fall . . . . The men in the ground vehicles were not Luxorians:

They were looters, from somewhere else. All the Luxorians were dead. . . .

A WOMAN began to scream hysterically, out in the passenger-lounge of the *Delilah*. Brent turned his head. The pimply-faced Rudl was being thrust angrily from her side by another passenger.

The men in the bar talked loudly. Brent sat with the drink of *sarfane*—with something else in it—in his hand. Kit Harlow had said that madness and frenzy would come upon the *Delilah's* passengers. The overdrive would stay off until that frenzy developed. It would continue until she and her father had been killed. Then, she had said composedly, the overdrive would be repaired and the *Delilah* would probably return to the port from which she had started, taking back its shaken, half-crazed passengers and the bodies of those who had died. None of it made sense, anyhow.

One thing was sure. The drinks of the *Delilah's* bar had been doctored within twenty minutes of the cutting of the overdrive. It should have taken nearly that long to be sure that a failure was irreparable. It seemed almost like a measure planned in advance. It was too quick. . . .

Brent tasted his *sarfane* again. He savored the spoiled flavor carefully, trying to discern what had been added to ruin the delicate flavor. The addition was aromatic, bitter. It was just enough to spoil the pleasure of drinking *sarfane*.

It's *iposap*, thought Brent. He tasted again, deliberately. *Taurine iposap*. It was a flavoring ingredient for mixed drinks, like the ancient bitters. It came in blue bottles with gold labels, and it was very, very expensive, and on some planets it was forbidden by law. Its flavor was fascinating and blended perfectly with most bar-dispensed beverages. It made them taste better, but most people avoided it. One drink, with one drop of *iposap* in it, was very good, but two were murder. Most drunks became fighting drunks when their drinks had been laced with *iposap*, and most drinkers were drunk with two such drinks under their belts.

If all the *Delilah's* drinks had been dashed like Brent's, they were not dosed to make drinkers sleepy, but to make them lunatics. In that case, the officers of the *Delilah* were not planning to check the horrors to be expected in any ship hopelessly lost in space, but were planning to hurry them and increase them. It was designed that madness should follow instantly upon despair. Decent people were to be overwhelmed by madmen before they could organize to die with dignity.

A child began to scream:

"Mummy! Mummy! Don't let them eat me! He says—"

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The pimply Rudl scuttled away from a terror-stricken child. The child's mother comforted it absorbedly, her own face ashen.

A man shouted hysterically in the bar: "If we gotta die we oughta kill those officers that didn't take care—" The bartender moved suavely about his duties—duties which consisted of mixing and serving drinks. Rudl sidled to the bar.

There was weeping in the passengers' lounge. A little girl screwed up her face and began to whimper through the mere contagion of despair. Her father picked her up and began to pat her back, his face vacant of all thought. He looked blankly at the wall, mechanically trying to soothe the child.

There was a thwack of fist against flesh. Someone at the bar, reeling, had struck someone else. Thick-tongued, he defied the world and fate and chance. The bartender set out more drinks. There was no flicker of light to indicate that the drink-charges were being punched on the bar-accounting system. Brent suddenly realized that the charge register had not flashed since he had been in the bar.

QUIETLY Brent spilled his drink and approached the bar. The bartender placed another drink before him. He tasted it. *Iposap* again—and no charge for the drink. Free drinks, and every one laced with the *Taurine* bitters that made one drink enough for most men, and two too many, and three an incitement to frenzy.

Brent spilled this drink, too, and went casually out of the bar. The atmosphere in it was growing tense and highly-charged. As he went out, a man bumped into him, headed in. Another passenger needed a drink to help him face the fact that the ship—on the face of things—would drift forever helplessly in emptiness. Forever was a harsh word. There was food and water and air. There was power. The ship could travel between any two planets of a solar system on its interplanetary drive. Such a journey might take months, but it could be done. It could travel perhaps one light-hour, or even two, but not for light-years. Therefore it would drift forever.

Brent went to his own cabin. Had he not been in the Profession he would have been raging. Instead he was wholly, icily calm. It's the idea, he thought, that she and her father will be killed by those beasts—made into beasts on purpose. Then maybe they'll even execute the survivors just to make everything tidy. In a day or so we'll all be classifiable as criminals.

Getting at some of his luggage and checking on what he extracted from it, he estimated there should be at least one murder on the *Delilah* within the next six hours. By that time everybody on the ship would have become acutely aware that there was life, in terms of food and water and air, to be gained every time someone else died.

But he underestimated. He was in his cabin less than thirty minutes. When he came out there was already a man dead on the floor of the passengers' lounge, with blood glistening in a dark pool beside him.

IV

IT WAS a very small cruiser, a private ship, built for trips no longer than between Darien III and its oversized moon, which was almost half the size of the planet itself. There were two young men and two girls in it, bound for the family estate of one of the girls on the moon. They came up out of atmosphere and the young man who was piloting the cruiser increased the drive. One of the girls sat beside him, laughing at things he said, which were neither more nor less witty than the things all young men say to make girls admire them. The other couple settled down to a card-game.

They were twenty thousand miles out when the detectors rang furiously. The

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pilot bent intently toward his controls. The girl said indignantly:

"It's a ship coming out of overdrive! That's too close for anybody to come out of overdrive!"

The young man stared blankly. It was not one ship. It was twenty. Forty. Sixty. It was a space-fleet! And there was no imaginable reason for a space-fleet to exist or to maneuver as a unit. The couple in the cruiser's control-room called to the others.

"Come up here and look!"

A huge ship turned and sped toward them. It came on at a furious acceleration. The young man piloting the tiny cruiser flicked his communicator-switch.

"Hello," he said curiously. "Who are you and what's all this fleet about?"

There was no answer. But there was a sudden blue-white glow at the bow of the nearing big ship.

The little cruiser's nose glowed. It went incandescent. There was a sudden puffing as its ports melted and let out the air within it. Which, of course, was the easiest way for the young people in it to die. They were quite dead before their cruiser had been melted down to an irregular ball of bright metal. And of course they did not see the great fleet divide into two portions, of which one went on to Darien III, while the other approached its inhabited moon. . . .

NONE of the *Delilah's* officers was anywhere about. Brent asked questions angrily. No ship's officer had appeared. The dead man lay where he had fallen. Somebody had come out of the bar, reeling. He shouted crazily:

"Everybody's gonna die! Everybody! Who's gonna be first?"

A sober man—now dead—had gone up to him and tried to quiet him, urging that the women were already despairing enough and there was surely no need for the children.

The drunk bellowed, "You be first!" And stabbed. Then he advanced upon other passengers, waving a blood-stained knife and shouting his senseless refrain: "Everybody's gonna die! Who'll be next?" It was motiveless murder, attributable exclusively to *iposap* in too many drinks. Some passengers fled from him. But a young man—one of the honeymooners Brent had noticed—charged with a chair held club-wise. Other men leaped in when he brought it down. The drunk was subdued and disarmed and bound with a volunteer guard placed over him. But no ship's officer had answered the signal—often repeated—that an emergency existed in the passengers' lounge.

It was the young honeymooner who told Brent about it. He regarded Brent with a calculating eye and said grimly:

"My name's Shannon. This is my wife. You've stayed sober, anyhow. If a few of us stick together we can keep things under control."

Brent approved of him, but said shortly:

"That doesn't seem to be the crew's intention. The drinks being served free are loaded with *iposap*. That's hardly encouraging."

Shannon said coldly:

"Would they be planning to leave us passengers locked up while they stay in the rest of the ship and have all the food—and air?"

"Hardly anything so simple," said Brent drily. "It's seemed to me that the trouble is being deliberately stirred up, besides the *iposap* contribution. There's a man named Rudl—"

Shannon's jaw tightened.

"I'm a construction man," said Brent, which was not untrue in one sense, but was far from the whole truth. "I just got out some keys. You may not know it, but the doors of a space-ship cabin can be locked. You might put the children in a cabin where your wife could take care of them in—relative safety."

Shannon stirred hungrily. Brent slipped two keys into his fingers.

"Give one of these to that girl in the corner, Kit Harlow," Brent commanded. "It's a personal matter."

"I'll do it," said Shannon grimly.

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"Thanks. If my wife can lock herself in—"

Brent glanced at the white-faced girl clinging to the other man's arm.

"Maybe she won't," he said. "But anyhow—if it's intended to hurry a breakdown of decency, better not call any meeting to organize anything else. If *iposap* is being served out free to encourage riot, there'll be moves made against a leader of sanity. Watch it."

Brent went back to the bar. The bartender was gone, but he had not locked up. There were open bottles all about, to be used or taken by a gesture. There were more men drinking, now. Some looked dazed and numb, eyes glassy. They stared into space. There were two women at a table. One gulped down a drink and cried shrilly, "I don't want to think! Get me another drink, somebody!" She was already fretful and querulous.

BRENT reached for a bottle and poured out a few drops. *Iposap.* He tried another. *Iposap.* There couldn't be any doubt. He felt certain objects in his pockets and was grimly glad he'd packed some special tools of a construction-man's using—they had been essential a little while back—in his bags.

A brawny man lurched up to Brent and said thickly:

"I don't like yer face!"

His fist lashed out. Brent blocked the blow, without returning it. Someone else said belligerently, "That's a dastardly trick, with all of us dyin'. . . ." Brent's assailant demanded ferociously, "Who's dyin'? I'm not!" He struck. It was senseless. It was sickening. It was not normal drunkenness. There was neither rhyme nor reason in any of it. A man lurched aggressively against Brent. *Crazy fool!* thought Brent bitterly.

He defended himself—ruthlessly, with the inconspicuous but deadly means of defense he had been taught in the Profession.

Fists flew. A bottle crashed. One of the two women screamed with rage. Her chair had been overturned. She scrambled up from the floor and flew at the nearest man in sight, screeching and scratching. . . .

The tumult grew horrible. It was like what passed for festivity in the lowest of dives. Men laughed drunkenly at the woman, who was now clawing her chosen victim, shrieking abuse at him for having knocked her to the floor—as if that were important with the *Delilah's* overdrive off. The man fought back. The woman's clothing tore.

They're watching her, thought Brent disgustedly, I can try it.

He vaulted the counter, and no one noticed. He crouched down. The front of the bar itself was solid. The bartender had entered through a small, concealed door. Brent found the handle. He went through. He found himself in the smallest of airlocks. He opened the farther door and was in the crew's part of the ship.

He was on a metal cat-walk amid a maze of fabricated girders, with feeble light showing the rounded compartments of the ship's essential machinery. The ship was actually an assemblage of metal balloons enclosed in an outer skin, with stiffening braces running in all directions.

Brent recognized the pattern instantly. The *Delilah* was a Stimson-design freighter modified for passengers. Her hull would be strictly standard in contour to fit inside an overdrive field.

He heard a dynamo-hum. It was making current for the ship's interior lighting. There was also the deep purring of the air-plant. He placed the two sounds in his mind, and from that knowledge could have drawn blueprints for the entire ship. The crew's quarters would be up high, just under the control-room. The interplanetary drive would be just above the ship's normal center of gravity. The overdrive must be in one particular spot because the overdrive field has to enclose the ship centrally. Brent knew where he was

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and where everything he wanted to find was, too. He headed for the overdrive room.

There were only dim service-lamps out here. They threw faint glows on the narrow steel plates of the catwalk on which he had emerged. It would lead to the crew-lift—the shaft up to the crew's quarters on which crewmen would rise and descend by the use of stirrups racked on every level. The fuel-tanks were globular, to resist internal pressure. The separate motor-rooms were also globular, so they could serve as air-tight compartments in case of need.

Brent went ten paces down the narrow walk. He rounded the ship's main water-tank. Then he vanished. He simply reached out, grasped a curving truss-braced girder, and swung into the obscurity between the giant metal balls. The girders, in pairs and with stiffening-members between them, were wholly practical ways to move from one place to another. Service-crews in space-ports used them.

HE CLIMBED into blackness, making no noise. Presently he was under the air-plant room. He heard the rushing sound of turbines pulling air through hoses from the several compartments through the ship.

Brent listened critically to the noise of the air-plant, as an indication of the age and design of the ship.

He was about to move on when he heard the rattle of a stirrup on the crew-lift. He watched. A figure descended slowly. He passed by a light in his descent. It was not a crew-member, but the passenger Rudl. He got off the lift-shaft, clipped the stirrup in its rack without fumbling, and moved along the catwalk Brent had used only minutes before.

He's been reporting, thought Brent coldly. They've probably figured out their time-table. So many riots, so many dead, so much of the unspeakable, and then they'll decide it's time to declare the overdrive repaired. And they'll go back to Khem IV because that's the ship's home port and murder has been done, and the passengers who survive will be tried and executed for having reacted to despair and the *iposap* that was given them.

He waited until the pimply man had vanished. Brent heard the click that told of the tiny airlock closed. He swung away, then, across the dim space of the ship's interior.

It was as he wormed his way toward the overdrive compartment that things fell into place with a click that was almost audible in his own thoughts. He realized what the message Kit had given him meant. It was suddenly the clearest and most obvious thing in the world that the planetary ruler of Khem IV would have his cooks executed if they served an Earth Commerce Commissioner a fruit called *vistek* on a planet called Khem IV. *Vistek* came from the other side of the Galaxy! It came from nine thousand light-years away!

Brent could see precisely why that accident had made it necessary for the *Delilah's* overdrive to be cut off until Kit Harlow and her father were dead. It was a matter he was especially trained to see, because it was a matter concerning his Profession.

V

THERE was a fire in the planet metropolis of Sardin VI. It had been a very beautiful city, with wide ways and splendid buildings of the beautiful, colored woods native to the planet. Those woods were used for jewel boxes on many distant worlds, because they gleamed like opalescent gems, and most of the buildings of the city were made of them. Even pictures of the city were admired for their subject-matter rather than their painting. It was said to have been the most beautiful place in which human beings ever lived.

But it was burning. It had burned for days. Beginning where a spark jumped because rain beat through a

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smashed window, it had been a very small fire at first. A child's foot could have stamped it out. But there was no child to stamp on it. It burned.

The second day of its burning, it could still have been extinguished. Perhaps on the third or even the fourth. But no one tried to save the city. It sent up clouds of resinous smoke from a wider and ever wider space.

Now the sun set upon its burning. It blazed from one horizon to the other. When night fell, even the sky above the city did not turn dark, but glowed sullenly from the flames that leaped and danced where the masterpieces of man's greatest architecture crumbled. From one horizon to the other there was a sheet of fire, in which columns and palaces slowly shriveled to ash. It was undoubtedly one of the most spectacular and tragic sights in history.

There was nobody left to see. . . .

THE overdrive compartment, like all the others on the *Delilah*, was a great round ball of metal with welded gores. Brent reached it and put his ear cautiously to the rounded wall. He listened for minutes. There were minute ringing noises in the metal, some of which were actually remote echoes of the air-plant's noises. But any large structure of metal, unless especially muffled, always has such noises. Sometimes they are easily heard, and then spacemen say that it is a singing ship and the superstition is that it is lucky. The *Delilah*, though, was not musical enough for that.

There was someone in the overdrive-room. Brent made sure. So before he swung around and into the entrance, he got something out of his pocket, and he stepped through the door with a small pocket-blaster out and ready.

The engineer was sitting in a folding foam-chair, staring at nothing as if fascinated by his own thoughts. As Brent loomed over him, he licked his lips. Then he jerked his head up, startled. He saw that Brent was not a crew-member, but a stranger. He made a convulsive movement.

"Still!" said Brent warningly. The tiny blaster bore very steadily. "What's up? Why is the overdrive off?"

The man choked, staring with horrified eyes at the blaster's muzzle. Brent glanced aside for the fraction of a second. The master-switch was open—the engine-room switch. He only needed to look directly at that. Without moving his eyes he could see that the telltale dials that would locate trouble—almost invariably hopeless trouble if it happened in space—were still hooded over. They were never used except in port to check the circuits—and of course, hopelessly, if something did go wrong in space. Between uses they were covered with plastic hoods to protect them from dust. They hadn't been unhooded. So there had been no attempt to find trouble. So there wasn't any trouble. The main switch had been opened on orders.

Brent moved the blaster suggestively.

"I said," he repeated softly, "what's the trouble? Why is the drive off? And don't talk loudly—why are the passengers invited to go mad with fear?"

The *Delilah's* engineer tried to speak.

"I—I—" Then his throat closed with a click. With a visible effort he tore his eyes from the blaster-muzzle and looked up at Brent's face. His expression was one of sheer terror.

"How about throwing the switch on?" asked Brent. The engineer moved trembling hands to obey—but Brent saw a gleam of hope in his eyes, or was it a gleam of cunning? Brent snapped, "Don't touch it!" Then he said as softly as before. "That was just a check-up. If you threw the switch, it wouldn't start the engines. It would just light up a 'ready for operation' light in the control-room, wouldn't it? And they'd know there was something wrong here. And they'd come—and maybe you'd live."

The engineer gasped:

"Don't—don't kill me!"

"Suppose you tell me how much you know," said Brent, eyes burning.

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The engineer moaned softly.

"So you don't know," said Brent, "that the overdrive was to be turned off, the passengers driven mad, and when the right people had been killed the ship was to turn around and head for port. The surviving passengers would be tried for murder, eh? How about the crew?" he asked with sardonic softness. "Did you stop to think that the crew might be executed for not preventing the passengers from murdering each other?"

The engineer babbled. He was a pitiable sight, but Brent was merciless. There were hundreds of thousands of colonized planets, now, with local histories up to two thousand years in length. Earth could not govern them—which was why the Profession was a necessity—and there were nearly as many forms of social organization as there were planets. Khem IV was a totalitarian government quite ruthless enough to do exactly what Brent had just named—and the engineer knew it. He whimpered.

Brent looked at him with scornful pity.

"But what can I do with you?" he demanded. "Apparently I know more than you do about this mess."

The engineer whimpered again. Then, with the frantic speed of desperation, he sprung from his chair at an alarm-button on the wall. Brent pulled trigger. There was no sound. The engineer's body thumped into the rounded hollow wall of the overdrive room, and then slumped down on the floorplates in the boneless limpness of a man killed by a blaster.

Brent put the blaster back in his pocket.

HE NOW regarded the overdrive with a grim and knowledgeable attention. But he couldn't afford to meddle with it just yet. He noted, though, the details of its installation. It was a good fifty years old. It had been installed by someone only half-qualified, by really modern standards. *They haven't read an engineering journal since this ship was built!* he thought grimly. They'd never heard of the Doorn-Welt equation, for one thing, which shows with such beautiful clarity how and why turning part of the second-stage exciter into a closed circuit gives multiplied space-modification effect. Brent—it was incidental to qualification for the Profession—could work on this drive for a bare few minutes and—

He nodded to himself. But the crew would be armed and desperate, and the passengers were already half-crazed with fear. Alarm the crew further and they might commit a massacre. . . . and to reassure the passengers would alarm the crew. Technically it would be easy, but humanly it was impossible, he thought. Yet the impossible would have to be done.

He moved about the absurdly simple apparatus that was the overdrive itself. It was merely a long bar of brightly-polished metal with a peculiar greenish cast. At its ends it branched into slenderer rods—almost wires—that went through the skin of the overdrive room and spread out and branched again and again until they ended in pointed projections a few inches only beyond the plating of the hull. There were four separate coils of seemingly bare copper wire, placed in particular relationship to the bar. And that was all. Even the copper seemed uninsulated. But Brent knew better than that.

He climbed away from the engine-room with the body dangling and jerking as he climbed among the girders in the semi-darkness.

It was almost an hour later when he reached the passengers' lounge again. He'd brushed himself carefully before re-entering. But nobody would have noticed, anyway.

A small group of passengers had gathered together, quietly and grimly waiting for something. The men—there were not too many of them—wore varying expressions of *pure* desperation. Be-

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hind them there were the women. Behind the women were children. There had been fighting. One man had a crude bandage covering half his face, as if someone had clawed at his eye all too successfully. There were some bent and broken chairs.

Kit Harlow and her father were near the group. Kit's face was shockingly pale. Her dress was torn. Her father's features were battered. Blood ran down one temple. A slow, deep rage, deeper than even his fury over what she had discovered, filled Brent to the very brim. He heard a snarling from the bar. "They think they're too good for us! They think—" it was the voice of Rudl—the pimply-faced man whom Brent had seen on his journey to the ship's control room. Brent ground his teeth.

Shannon, the young bridegroom, came suspiciously toward him.

"Where were you?" he demanded coldly. "We could have used you just now."

Brent said harshly:

"There should be knives in the dining-salon. Haven't you thought of that?"

Shannon started. He beckoned to other men. Brent led the way. The tables were bare. Brent jerked at drawers. There was the cutlery. He began to dump it into a table-cloth pulled from a table. Shannon helped.

"Forks too," said Brent between his teeth. "They can stab."

They went back, with arms. There were large carving-knives, which would be deadly. Brent brought table-linen, cloths and the like. He showed a man how to wrap a table-cloth around his left forearm, so it would serve as padding against the blow of a club, or would ward off a knife. It was a trick out of antiquity, and it was a spaceman's-dive trick, too. He began to help pass out knives. He came to Kit, and whispered shortly:

"I saw the overdrive. It's in perfect working order. We've got a chance. Don't let yourself get killed yet!"

But he raged at the signs that she had been forced to struggle in the riot he had missed. He went back into the dining-salon and burdened himself once more. Then he went to the bar and with brisk, angry motions threw water-pitchers over the heads and onto the heads of the men inside it.

It would have been suicidal with normal men. But the crowd in the bar was half-crazed by *iposap*—made frantic by a deliberately excessive dosage. Every man clutched some drinkable while Rudl exhorted them. They were drugged and drunken and he worked them up. . . .

The noise was that of wild beasts turned loose. A man came staggering out of the melee, made suddenly cold sober by blood which jetted from his throat. He looked down at it stupidly, and leaned against the wall mutely imploring help from those he had joined in attacking only a little while ago.

It was too late. His knees sagged and gave way under him.

But Brent did not see that. He'd made a diversion. He had the pack fighting blindly. He dived into the fray.

There are tricks of fighting among rioters and drunken men. They are not pretty tricks, but they are effective. Brent used them—sparingly.

BRENT got through, crouched below visibility and fighting his way savagely he reached Rudl. And the pimply man did not know he was endangered until a fist sank deep into his belly, and he collapsed—and a fist connected scientifically with his jaw. Then Brent crouched over him, searching him swiftly. He found a flat case. He reached up and put it in the pocket of one of the surging mob about and above him. Then he dragged the pimply man to the wall and, crouched low, with his head protected by his hunched shoulders, he worked his way out again.

He was not unscathed. His clothes were ripped and he was bleeding when he dragged Rudl out of the door. He was staggering and panting, alike from the beating and the exertion, when he blindly essayed to open a cabin door and

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drag Rudl inside. Two figures followed —Kit and her father.

"Close the door!" Brent panted.

Instantly he began to tear strips from the bed-clothing to bind his victim. His hands. His feet. He disarmed and gagged the pimply Rudl.

"I should—kill him," he said, breathing hard when it was done. "He was an agent provocateur assigned to stir those drugged fools to murder one another—and you. He had a communicator on him. It carried every sound he heard and every word he spoke to the control-room. One of those drunks in the bar has it on him now. It's still keeping the listeners in the control-room entertained. But I haven't got much time—"

Kit said quietly:

"It's no use. This is arranged. My father and I are to be killed. If we—locked ourselves in our cabins and—used the blasters on ourselves it would save other lives."

Brent said, still panting.

"I've killed the overdrive engineer. Now I've manhandled this man and planted his communicator on someone else. When the skipper finds his engineer missing, it won't take him long to figure that somebody knows what's up! When he finds that Rudl's out of circulation and his communicator's in another man's pocket, he'll know somebody understands the whole game! And will he dare leave any passenger alive, if one of them knows what he's up to?"

Kit had been pale enough. Now she went even paler.

"I think," she said with difficulty, "that you have doomed everyone."

"Maybe I have," growled Brent. "Your murder has been effectively bungled, now. And I rather think that the government that ordered this won't be too merciful to bunglers!"

Kit's father said unsteadily:

"Your prisoner, here, just heard what you said. Was that wise?"

Brent stared at the trussed-up Rudl. He seemed unconscious. But Brent leaned over him and lifted an eyelid. A pupil—an eye glared at him. But an unconscious man's eyes roll back. A lifted lid shows only the white.

Brent laughed.

"It wasn't wise for him. If I know rotten governments, when they send somebody out to do dirty work, they give them a psycho test afterward to make sure they didn't learn anything they shouldn't. So Rudl, now, is going to learn something he won't like. If we passengers are killed—which begins to look possible—and if Rudl lives to get back, he'll be sorry, because when his psycho test shows that he's found out why you two needed to be killed. . . ."

Kit stared at him. Brent nodded at her.

"There've been four planets found with all their cities looted and all their people dead. You, sir," Brent looked at the Earth Commerce Commissioner, "you found out the first clue to what's happening. You were served *vistek* at a banquet in the palace of the planet ruler of Khem IV. And *vistek* doesn't grow on this side of the Galaxy, and can't be brought here. It's just as impossible to have *vistek* on Khem IV as it would be to build a space-fleet capable of murdering and looting whole planets, without a word of the matter leaking out. It's impossible. But it's happened. And you've guessed the answer, I suppose, just as I have. And now our friend Rudl may guess it too. But if he gets back home with the news, his government will kill him for knowing too much." Then Brent said grimly, "He probably knows how, too. Just to make sure—"

He bent over the bound man, whose eyes were now open and rolling wildly.

"Rudl, your home planet's the base from which ships take off to loot and murder. The ships weren't built there and they aren't manned there. They come from a long way off in a brand-new fashion which isn't even overdrive. *If* you get back home, the psycho tests will show you know that much, and I suspect you know they'll spend a lot of

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time and effort on you, trying to get you to tell them more."

The beady eyes of the prisoner were wild with terror.

"I don't like this man," said Brent. "I'd intended to turn out the lights and let him wake up in the darkness. In blackness and silence, and unable to move a muscle, he'd probably have thought he was dead and in hell. But this is better. Come on—"

He led the way out of the cabin. He locked the door behind him, with one of the keys no passenger was supposed to have.

VI

THERE was a place on Procus II where the air was very, very still and the atmosphere was one of utter unreality because there were no noises. There were no noises at all. There was a village a little distance off—quaint, comfortable houses, and a tower for the reception of power for the houses and farms nearby, and there was a highway which was straight and white. But there were no sounds.

It was uncanny. The grass was suitably green, and it grew thriftily. The trees throve. But there were no insects. No birds flew. The barnyards of the farm-houses showed no motion whatever. Nobody moved in the village street. Nothing happened.

The really incredible thing, though, was the stillness. If there had been anyone to notice, the whole landscape would have seemed like an incredibly perfect stereo-view—frozen in color and in silence. There should have been tiny mites crawling feverishly in the grasses. There should have been flying things in the air. The highway should have had—at least occasionally—a smoothly streamlined vehicle rushing to the sound of high-pitched whistling from beyond the horizon to pass swiftly upon the long white way.

But nothing moved for a long, long time. The village was utterly still. The fields were utterly silent. The air was utterly empty. Presently a little wind began to blow. Then there were the sounds it made. There were no others. Over all the planet Procus II there was no sound except that of the wind in the trees, and the pattering of rain, and the sound of surf on its beaches.

There would be no other sounds until men came from somewhere and buried its people and moved into the houses and began to replace the treasures that looters had taken away, and began to live there again. They would bring animals, at first, and then birds and insects too. Men would not like to live on a world where there were no longer any noises except of their own making. They would hear ghosts. And men do not like to live with ghosts.

But the fields were very bright and green in the sunshine. . . .

IN BRENT'S own cabin Den Harlow, who was an Earth Commerce Commissioner but whose face was bruised and swollen and who had blood down the side of his face—Den Harlow said quietly, "What are you?"

Brent had an open traveling-bag on the bunk. It did not contain clothing. It was a tool-chest. But it contained a very curious assortment of tools and instruments. He chose with some care but more haste. He was stuffing his pockets.

"I'm a man in a hurry," he observed. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know," said Kit's father mildly. "Because either you are an extraordinary fool, or you are extraordinary in some other way." He drew out a small medal, hanging on a chain about his neck. He twisted it oddly and showed it to Brent. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Brent hesitated. Then he said:

"Y-yes. But it doesn't put me under your orders. I'm afraid I rank you."

Den Harlow, who was a Very Important Person indeed, turned to his daughter and said drily:

"The Profession." Then he looked at

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what Brent showed him, and added, to Kit, "I am ranked. I do take orders from him."

"I'd like it," said Brent, "if you would get this suicide-complex out of your daughter's mind."

Kit's eyes were glowing. She drew in her breath sharply. The Profession, of course, was something wholly unofficial, and wholly unpaid, and it was usually considered fabulous. It was an activity that nobody admitted to exist, because it was contrary to all reason. Not one person in ten thousand had heard even a rumor of it on Earth. Elsewhere it was not even a rumor, but it was very much of a necessity.

There was not, though, any simple way to describe it. It was a loose association. Some of them had official position and rank, like Kit's father. Some were quite inconspicuous individuals like Brent. They did things which were often illegal and frequently preposterous, and they were never rewarded at all. Sometimes they were severely punished. But those who were of the Profession were very proud of their membership and their work.

It had started long, long ago. With tens of thousands of colonized planets in the Galaxy an Earth imperium was impossible as a practical matter. Even a planetary government, for so large a population as Earth had, was almost unworkable. There is a limit to the number of people who can actually be represented by any organization with authority. On Earth, the first planetary government proved unwieldy. No government could function efficiently over such great areas and over such masses of people. On Earth, the first planetary government had to subdivide into associated nations of practical size, and the top authority was now a Council with limited powers over individuals. It had to be that way! From the first it was realized that Earth could not rule its colonies. They had to be free in order to exist.

Earth's colonial governments were ones of every conceivable complexion. But Earth could not interfere with them. It could not fight them without conquering them, it could not conquer them without ruling them, and it could not rule them. An interstellar government was simply not a practical matter if the welfare of the people it ruled, rather than the vanity of its rulers, were to be its prime objectives. And Earth had a quaint tradition that government was instituted for the people.

But there were madmen in the Galaxy who wished to rule anyhow. If Earth claimed the right to stop them, it would claim empire itself, and that meant exactly the evil Earth deplored. So the Profession came gradually into being, as a form of patriotism owing loyalty to a higher level than nationality or even one's native planet. The Profession tried desperately—and sometimes with surprising success—to prevent the lunacies of warfare. Only one thing made warfare possible—the development of super weapons, and the Profession worked single-mindedly to prevent just that.

BRENT, as a member of the Profession, had absolutely no legal status or authority save to ask for help from other members of the Profession. He had only the obligation—given him by his training—to move about the Galaxy and try to make sure that no one world anywhere acquired new weapons it did not share immediately with its sister worlds. Perhaps it was absurdly idealistic, but—as history has shown since, and all too clearly—it was the way by which civilization endured.

As now. . . .

He closed his tool-kit carefully and said:

"I was working in the Cephis star-cluster. They were building a big fleet of new-type space-ships there. I got into the construction-crew to make sure there were no new tricks being included that were kept secret. My papers are in order for that work. But I heard

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about Procus II being found murdered—the fourth planet killed and looted by somebody from somewhere. I headed back to Earth through this section, trying to pick up rumors here and there. On Khem IV, I'll admit, I didn't find a thing. It's a beastly tyranny, of course, but if people stand for that sort of thing, they invite it. That wasn't my business. But I didn't find a whisper of evidence that a space-fleet could be built and armed on that planet, able to do what has been done."

Den Harlow said briefly:

"It wasn't built there. It wasn't armed there. It couldn't be! I made my Commerce Commissionership an excuse for traveling about—just as you manufactured an excuse. But Kit and I were served *vistek* at an official banquet. And I've tasted *vistek* before, over on the other side of the Galaxy."

Brent said:

"I've heard it couldn't be shipped, even frozen. When cosmic rays hit it, it goes bad. Even the seeds rot when cosmics get at them. So it's only able to be eaten within a week's space-journey from the planet where it grows normally."

Den Harlow nodded.

"It's a wonderful fruit," he said, with the ghost of a smile. "I enjoyed it heartily—even though when I tasted it I knew it hadn't been brought across the Galaxy by a spaceship. It was so inconceivably foolish to serve it to me, though, that I couldn't believe the Khem IV planet ruler knew where it came from. I thought it might have been given to him as a gift—something like that. So I asked. But he knew! He looked deadly. Later, I heard he had his cooks executed for serving it to me."

"And then," said Kit ruefully, "we knew that we'd be murdered so we couldn't take word back that a fruit which can't be shipped from the planet it grows on had been brought clear across the Galaxy. We've been extremely careful. The only hope we had was that we could be so careful that our murders would look suspicious to the Profession. After all, my father's official position made it awkward to murder us outright. That would have been suspicious!"

"Now, though," he told her, "you two will try to stay alive."

She nodded, her eyes bright.

"I'm going to see if I can do something practical," he added.

"Yes. Be—careful, will you?"

He opened the cabin door and went out. He was half-way across the passengers' lounge before he realized that it was not quite necessary for one person in the Profession to ask another to be careful. It wasn't Professional. It was—well—personal. And she'd looked at him with bright eyes. . . .

The bedlam in the bar was dying down, now, with Rudl no longer on hand to stimulate it. Badly beaten men wanted fresh drinks. Victors in battle wanted to celebrate. But there were some unconscious figures on the floor. They might be sunk in drunken sleep, or they might not. A woman was dancing tipsily, casting sickeningly inviting glances about her.

He went into the dining salon. Into the kitchen. Both were empty. Presently they were empty even of him. He had returned to the empty spaces between the balls of metal-plate inside the *Delilah's* skin. When he went out the air-lock, he had a blaster ready in his hand.

Not quite an hour later, a simultaneous and unanimous gasp sounded in the passengers' lounge. It was almost a cry, choked and incredulous, from every throat among the passengers.

Each of them had exactly the same experience. The cosmos had seemed to them to whirl dizzily in an expanding spiral. Then their stomachs turned over, twice.

The ship's overdrive had come on again. The passengers who'd seemed nearest to madness from terror and despair, now seemed closest to going out of their minds with joy. The *Delilah*

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was again moving through space in overdrive!

They did not realize that there was a great difference between this overdrive and the one that had been cut off.

VII

THE message went in on a very tight beam, and it was a double-transmission. It could be received only on a very special instrument.

An answer went out. It would take time to reach its destination in emptiness. The answer was similarly complex in its transmission, but its meaning was quite simple. No, there were no ships due from anywhere. No. There was no reason for a space-fleet not to come in. Yes. The apparatus on the ground was quite ready.

Then, on the ice-cap, a huge framework began to come up out of what seemed a crevasse in a glacier. It rose and rose and rose. There was a square metal frame. It heaved up smoothly until it reared two hundred feet high in a waste of frozen snow and ice. It was two hundred feet across. It was filled in, absolutely, by a shimmering silvery film which had the curious optical quality of an obsolutely perfect reflector.

It waited.

Presently there were humming sounds in the sky. A wire-basket transmitter pointed skyward, sending a guiding beam. A dark shape appeared. It descended swiftly. It moved toward the square frame with the shimmering silvery film. It moved into that film. It vanished.

It did not come out on the far side of the framework. It went into the film and ceased to be. Another dark shape descended, and another and another and another. . . . In a somehow evil procession a space-fleet descended to atmosphere, and projected itself into the appearance of a silver bubble-film—and it was not. There were sixty vessels.

When the last had vanished, the square framework began to descend again. It sank down into what seemed to be a crevasse. Then there was nothing but a small and inconspicuous building on a snow-cap, an ice-field, which reached for hundreds and hundreds of miles in every direction. The space-fleet was not anywhere around. Not anywhere within thousands of light-years of the planet Khem IV. . . .

NOW there was a vastly different atmosphere in the passengers' lounge of the *Delilah*. The ship was back in overdrive! With returned spirits, they tried to forget the two dead men in a silent cabin. The passengers were sure that everything would be all right now. The *Delilah* was headed on for port. Oh, undoubtedly she was on her way to Loren II, where she had been bound in the first place!

Meanwhile there were injured to be cared for. There were too many of them. Those who had been only drunk were sleeping heavily. Some wept hysterically, remembering. Some—less self-conscious—turned from maniacal frenzy to a beaming, maudlin affection for all their supposed kind. *Iposap* did not make men beasts. It merely helped the beast within them express itself. Now, relieved of terror and horror and dread and despair, they were like lambs. But still there were too many wounded men.

Kit looked at Brent with warm, admiring eyes. He had not only accomplished great things, but he was of the Profession. And that was a very great thing. Young Shannon came over to Brent, his wife following timidly behind him.

"There's been nobody showing up," he said in a low tone, "to tell us we're back on overdrive. They should be coming in to explain that now they've fixed everything. Why haven't they?"

Brent said:

"They were pretending to be busy. Now they are busy!"

"Doing what?" asked Kit, watching his face.

"Trying to find out what I did to their

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overdrive—though they don't know I did it. Also they're trying to turn it off."

"Can't they?"

"Not unless they smash it," Brent told her in grim amusement. "And I don't think they're that desperate yet. But they're on the dizzy side! The overdrive shouldn't work, and it does. They didn't turn it on, but it's on. And they can't turn it off. But that's not the worst of it, from their standpoint."

He looked at Kit, but he felt a little pang of envy of the young bridegroom, whose wife touched his arm lightly and seemed perfectly confident and content. Brent had never had a girl act that way about him. He hadn't wanted any to. But, looking at Kit, he knew that it would feel very satisfying.

"The worst of it," he said drily, "is that it's a different overdrive altogether. This is an old ship. It had a maximum speed of a light-year of distance in a week of time. But some tricks have been found out since she was built. One is a better set-up for the exciter-coils. It's beautifully simple if you understand it, but it can't be fooled with if you don't. If you change the second-stage exciter just exactly right, the overdrive speed shoots away up! I made that change. The *Delilah's* traveling a light-year every four hours, now. It ought to show up in the control-room, and up there they should be starting to go crazy."

If he knew spacemen, they would be.

JUST such inexplicable factors were enough to put the crew into a panic. With the *Delilah* running wild, out of all control and going forty-odd times faster than possible, the crew should be close to gibbering.

But the passengers were beautifully confident. Even Kit said relievedly:

"You've made the ship go faster? Then we'll soon be landing on Loren II!"

"We've passed it," said Brent. "Some time ago. I could handle the ship, but the skipper can't, but he'd kill me if I tried to explain. He'll never be able to land this ship by himself now."

The last was true. If the skipper of an old-style Diesel ship suddenly found the speed of his craft multiplied by forty-odd—like the *Delilah's*—and had only the feeblest of crawls—like the *Delilah's* interplanetary engines—for low, he'd have trouble docking. Either he'd ram the dock before he could stop, or else he'd cut his engines so far offshore that he'd never attain it against wind and tide.

Den Harlow said:

"Then where are we going, if not to Loren II?"

"I've no idea," admitted Brent. "But I'm a lot less worried than our skipper. He really has something to worry about!"

In planetary drive, all the stars blazed. From a control-room there was light on every hand. Suns gleamed in a myriad colors. There was no spot where the eye could rest—when a ship was moving on interplanetary drive—where a bright or faint star did not glimmer.

In overdrive of the type built into the *Delilah*, there had always been stars straight ahead, which moved and writhed as the ship drove on. They seemed to streak away from the bow in every direction, moving more and more swiftly as they spread, but suddenly dimming to go out entirely. All about and behind the ship was blackness. It was a horrible, tangible blackness, and from the control room it had always seemed as if the *Delilah* fled madly to escape from a huge bag of pure darkness which forever pursued her.

The new overdrive was worse. There was just one tiny bright spot visible. It was straight ahead. It changed in brightness and in color. Sometimes it almost went out. Always it flickered toward extinction, and brightened again, but always it seemed that next instant it would go out entirely and then the *Delilah* would be left alone in a monstrous emptiness in which nothing else existed at all—that it would be engulfed in a cosmos in which there was literally

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nothing but itself, and there could be no destination because nothing else was.

It would not be good for the nerves of an unprepared man to look out the bow-ports of the *Delilah,* just now.

Kit continued to smile warmly at Brent. But her father protested:

"But we must be going somewhere!"

"The trouble is that we may be headed anywhere," said Brent. He explained awkwardly, "I thought I'd better install the new drive to jolt the crew a little. I was afraid they'd miss their engineer, and Rudl, and start investigating in the passengers' quarters. I came to help in case they did. But they're busy. I'll go back and finish my job."

Kit said hopefully:

"May I come and help?"

"There may be trouble," said Brent. "They may be hunting for the engineer."

"I've a blaster now," she reminded him. "You gave it to me when you disarmed Rudl. I could watch while you work."

Her father said matter-of-factly:

"She's a very good shot. And as for the danger, if anything happens to you we're all dead anyhow."

"We'll go through the kitchen," he told her. "There's a door to the rest of the ship from there."

THERE was a woman in the kitchen, though. She was unskilfully preparing food for a child who stayed close to her. The woman said fretfully, "After all the terrible things that have happened, I do think the officers would send the cooks back!"

"They're probably all working to keep the overdrive going," said Kit gravely.

The woman sat the child on a stool and began to feed it. They did not want her to see them disappear into the working section of the ship. Kit rummaged for food for the two of them. She brought Brent a half-warm lunch-pack.

"We should talk," she suggested. "I'd like to know about you."

"You know everything that's important," he said briefly. "You know how I think things tie in?"

She waited, watching him admiringly. He felt the admiration and liked it. But he pretended not to notice.

"There's been theorizing," he said in a low tone, "that even overdrive isn't the limit in transportation. On the face of it, it's happened. *Vistek* fruits can't be shipped from the planet they grow on, because cosmic rays reduce them to an unpalatable pulp. Nobody's ever been able to make a *vistek* seed grow away from the planet Malden—and that's on the other side of the Galaxy."

Kit urged him to continue.

"There's one way it could have gotten there," Brent told her quietly. "A transmitter. A transmitter of matter. In theory that would be instantaneous. But so far as the Profession knows it's never been done. But *vistek* on Khem IV proves it has been done."

"It follows," said Kit sagely. "Of course!"

"A transmitter on Malden, and a receiver-transmitter on Khem IV. There's a tyranny on Khem IV. There's a barbarous empire out at Malden. There's an emperor with an aristocracy and torture-chambers and an army and navy. Right?"

"So my father said," she agreed.

"He'd have delusions of grandeur," said Brent sourly. "It's an occupational disease of emperors. He'd have ambitions to make an Empire that would include all humanity. It's been proved that it won't work, but he'd think he could work it. And if he got hold of a matter-transmitter, he could shift his space-fleet anywhere he pleased much faster than any fleet could follow it to fight it."

Kit said matter-of-factly, "My father doesn't think they would try conquest at first. They'd poison the air of a planet and kill everybody, and then loot it afterward. That would be to reward the army and navy. Then they'd attack key planets. Earth, for one. They'd destroy the strong planets which could make

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fighting-fleets in days, if they wanted to. They'd raid, first—striking, sneaking back home by matter-transmitter, and then striking again. Bit by bit they'd whittle away the strength of civilization. When it was weak enough, they'd take over what was left."

"And they've knocked off four planets right here," said Brent coldly, "through a matter-transmitter that must be on Khem IV. They can bribe with the loot of worlds—I wonder how many other places they raid from?"

The whole concept was overwhelming in its destructive potentialities.

Brent saw red. But then the woman in the kitchen lifted her child down from its stool. She wiped off its face saying bitterly:

"At least they ought to let the cooks back!"

She led the child out of the kitchen. Brent said curtly:

"Let's go!"

HIS personal affairs, and even the situation on the *Delilah* faded into insignificance beside the situation only the three of them on the *Delilah* fully recognized. If this scheme succeeded, civilization—in terms of freedom for men—would be chipped away and chipped away until only an empire swollen with loot and armed past resistance would be left. . . .

The two of them got into the tiny air-lock that was the egress from the kitchen into the crew's part of the ship. And suddenly Brent's thoughts drew back from the immensities of galactic dangers, and he was acutely conscious of the fact that Kit was pressing close beside him. He knew that she looked up at his face in the tiny cubicle. And he realized with unfeigned astonishment that even with so much more important matters in hand he wanted very badly to kiss her then and there.

But he didn't. Instead, he opened the air-lock's outer door. Then they were in that unearthly area of metal balloons held in place by spidery girders, and dim lights, and danger.

Brent led the way. Abruptly, he stopped and pointed out the way to climb across the girders. Kit followed him without fear. There were many small sounds here; the dynamo-whine, and the air-plant noises, and now and again faint clickings of relays.

But suddenly there were voices.

Lights among the empty spaces were few and dim. The voices sounded eerily, reflected so many times and so erratically among strange metal shapes. But there was a near-riot in being. There were yappings. There were snarlings.

Then a deep voice roared. There was a crackling, rasping sound. Someone screamed. The deep voice roared again.

Brent whispered.

"They're getting worked up. That sounded like a try at mutiny, and a hand heat-beam ending it. The crew probably wanted to smash the overdrive regardless, and somebody had to be shot . . . I wouldn't like to be in the skipper's boots."

The yappings and snarlings ceased. There were whinings instead. The deep voice bellowed. The babbling and whining stopped.

"The skipper's still in charge," said Brent. "We'll soon end that!"

Kit's shoulder touched his. She clung to a narrow girder in a dimness filled with geometrical shapes. There were humming reechoes of the noises just ended.

"I've got my blaster ready if they come this way," whispered Kit. "If they do smash the overdrive, can you fix it?"

He nodded. She smiled at him. Their faces were very close. It was a ridiculous time and place for such things, but suddenly he found himself kissing her.

She kissed him back. Her eyes were joyous. She had to hold fast with both hands or she would drop from the girder. He stopped in panic. She laughed softly. This was the strangest of possible times and places for a man and a girl to kiss each other. Then he said feverishly:

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"Come on! Let's get to some place where it's solid!"

VIII

ON A GREAT plain outside the capital city of the planet Malden there were gigantic structures showing the silvery films of matter-transmitters. No visitors ever came to this city. It was not allowed. Very, very few visitors indeed ever came to Malden any longer. Travelers were told there was a quarantine, or that space-lines to Malden ran rarely.

If a traveler did reach Malden, he did not leave. Not ever.

But the people of Malden did not mind. From time to time the communicator-systems of the planet gave notice. Then great mobs assembled before the matter-transmitter films. Presently the blunt noses of space-ships appeared, and space-ships came out of the wavering films, in long lines of ugly shapelessness, and they settled on the meadows. Then the mobs surged toward them.

And the crews of the space-ships threw out treasure to the mobs. Jewels, and gold, and fine fabrics, and all the treasures of looted Galaxy were lavished on the Malden population. And then the Emperor showed himself, strutting, and shouts of adulation filled the air. True, only a fraction of the brigand-ships' cargoes was distributed, but that was richness. True, the Emperor himself possessed such wealth as had never been dreamed possible, but that was natural.

The Emperor and the people of Malden, alike, believed that they would go on forever like this. That the planet Malden could be a bandit stronghold while it tore down the civilization of the worlds beyond, and then—without changing—be the capital of the empire of all inhabited worlds.

That was foolish. Its downfall had already begun. . . .

THE man at the controls of the *Delilah* began to scream crazily. The controls did not control anything. The ship sped on through a horrible blackness which had only one tiny point of light in it, and that faint glimmering blinked and wavered and seemed perpetually about to go out. Nothing changed her motion. Nothing could touch her. Nothing could communicate with her. She was a runaway in a cosmos of nothingness which seemed constantly about to swallow her forever.

The helmsman, whose helm controlled nothing, beat with his fists at the bow ports which opened on blackness. He seized something—he did not know what—and battered blindly at everything and anything about him. And he screamed. . . .

Brent finished his work. It was a highly unlikely task he had set himself, and he performed it in a most improbable fashion. He took control of the *Delilah* with a pair of tiny, animal-hair brushes and two containers of quick-drying fluid, plus two small instrument-cases from his pockets.

He took one of the cases out and wrenched off a magnetic keeper, and put the case against a girder. It clung instantly. It was very near to one of the rods of greenish overdrive-alloy which ran through all the ship in a specific design. He opened a container of liquid and began to paint, very painstakingly, a line of quickly-drying liquid from one point of the box to another spot some little distance away. He painted another line, and another, and another, perhaps a dozen, in all. A little later he painted narrower lines down the center of each of the original lines, with liquid from the second container, and using the second brush. This was nearly the end of his task.

Kit stayed close to him. When he moved, she moved to remain as close to him as she could. As he worked, Brent thought in astonishment, *So this is how it happens!* He led a tiny line of liquid to the greenish-tinted rod. He moved back to the small box clinging to the steel beam. Kit followed him. *I like it!*

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Brent thought absorbedly. He made a liquid connection to a metal stud on the box. It dried immediately.

He stood up in the near-darkness.

"Finished," he said.

Kit went back into his arms.

The space-liner *Delilah* sped on. She traveled, now at some two thousand times the speed of light. In a day she covered nearly twice the average distance between solar systems. In a week she would go from one star-cluster to another. In a month from one quadrant to another. In a year she would travel farther than mankind had expanded in the first two thousand years of space-travel.

Presently, almost reluctantly, Brent and Kit moved back toward the passengers' quarters. In the air-lock that led in they were again pressed closely together. But this time Brent bent down hungrily to the face lifted up to him.

LATER in Den Harlow's cabin, Brent closed and locked the door. He took the second of the two essential cases from his pocket.

"This is a microwave relay," he explained. "I was working on ships out in the Cephis cluster, you remember. This is a gadget used to test circuits when you don't want to be right on the spot. The relay-box is out near the ship's skin. This controls it. I've got a dozen different circuits lined in to that box, and from here I can work with any one of them. As long as I have this in my hand, I should be able to run the ship from anywhere in it, only since I can't see outside the ship, it's no use for navigating."

He explained the manner of his rewiring job. Of course the ancient practice of bulky insulation had long been abandoned. Nowadays, dipped in thin lacquer, a wire became insulated by a transparent, almost infinitesimal film which was proof against any voltage.

He recounted the Thommasson Law, which explains the superconductivity of mercury and tin and other metals at four degrees Kelvin. He explained that he had made his connections to his relay-box by first painting a stripe of insulation along the ship's girders, and then had painted a narrower stripe of dissolved superconductor in the middle. A superconductor has literally no electrical resistance at all. A thread the size of a spider's web will carry a hundred thousand amperes without heating. So Brent had very simply and effectively concentrated all the controls of the *Delilah* at his remote-controlled relay by means of strips of practically invisible lacquer. And he should now have the ship entirely obedient to him in his cabin.

"We'll shake 'em up a bit first," he said tensely, "and then send some dot-dash stuff on their lighting system."

Kit watched his face. He opened the relay-control box. He pushed a button. Instantly there was the dizzy spiralling of all space and a feeling of acute nausea. The *Delilah's* overdrive was off again. He left it off for three seconds. He pressed another button. The spiralling—in reverse—and again the nausea. The ship was again traveling at two thousand times the speed of light. He left it on three seconds, and cut it, and left it off three seconds, and threw it on again. He did it with deliberate rhythm, so there could be no doubt that it was being done by intention.

"The passengers will panic again," he said, "but I can't help that!"

He gave them a series of jolts by flicking the overdrive on and off.

"Now I'll talk to them," said Brent. "This is the ticklish part."

He began to press and release another button on the relay-box. It was dot-dash communication, utterly primitive in form but still used for emergency communication by space-craft. As Brent pushed and released his button, the lights in the crew's quarters and all the working part of the ship dimmed and brightened. It would amount to the most self-evident yet untraceable form of signalling.

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"I a-m s-t-o-w-a-w-a-y," he ticked off. "Y-o-u c-a-n-n-o-t f-i-n-d m-e."

The light in the cabin went out. Brent groped in his bag and a tiny but very fierce bluish-white battery-lamp glowed. It lighted the small room, and Den Harlow watching, and Kit looking warmly at Brent.

"Smart man, the Skipper," said Brent grimly. "He thinks fast. When I started sending him signals, he turned out our lights. If I demanded to have them back on again he'd know a passenger was responsible."

He ticked off:

"I w-i-l-l r-e-s-t-o-r-e c-o-n-t-r-o-l t-o y-o-u- i-f y-o-u p-r-o-c-e-e-d t-o n-e-a-r-e-s-t h-a-b-i-t-a-b-l-e p-l-a-n-e-t a-n-d l-a-n-d a-n-s-w-er v-i-a c-r-e-w l-i-g-h-t-i-n-g s-y-s-t-e-m."

"What could he do?" asked Kit breathlessly, "if he won't believe you?"

"He could pump air out of the passengers' quarters," said Brent. "But he couldn't bleed it out into space while we're in overdrive. Not unless he went crazy!"

He watched a tiny dial on the relay-control box.

A long time later, the dial on his control-box kicked. He watched it.

"He's agreed," he said skeptically. "My guess is he'd have to shoot all his crew if he didn't. But he's in a bad fix!"

He signalled again, for a long time.

"I've told him his new speed and given him ten hours to find a planet. I told him how to handle the ship on planetary approach. Now we'll see what happens."

He put the case in his pocket. He unlocked the door. He put out the light from his bag before he opened it.

Blackness pervaded the passengers' lounge. A woman was weeping hysterically. Then someone flicked on a pocket lighter. It was a tiny point of light. The overdrive went off. It stayed off for minutes. Brent murmured: "He's picking a nearby solar system—astrogation." The overdrive went on again. Kit said:

"Shouldn't the—passengers be given some hope?"

"Not yet," said Brent.

There was a long wait. A tense wait. Then the lights came on.

There were crewmen coming out of the bar and the kitchen and the steward's air-lock. They had blasters bearing on all who stirred. They were frightened, as well as desperate. A man in a skipper's uniform, with dark brows almost meeting over his forehead, glared at the again-terrified passengers.

Brent said sharply to the two beside him:

"Get hold of something! Quickly!"

He caught at a chair-rail on the wall with his right hand. His left went swiftly into his pocket.

The skipper said, raging:

"Go ahead! Wipe them out!"

He raised his blaster to aim at Den Harlow.

And then all weight vanished. The ship's artificial gravity went off.

Brent shifted hands, holding himself steady with his left hand. The skipper did not realize, for a moment. He raised his blaster. As his arm and the heavy weapon rose, his body tilted gracefully forward. The blast made a spurt of smoke from the floor. Then Brent fired with his soundless pocket weapon. There were shrieks of terror from the passengers.

THEY fell. Endlessly. Horribly. Interminably. Their feet did not press upon the floor. They could not flee or dodge. They could not even turn their bodies. If a woman tried to thrust her child behind her, she found herself floating inches from the floor and the child an uncontrollable floating object which moved her as she moved it. A man lifted his hands before his eyes to shut out the sight of doom, and his body rotated grandly so that he floated face-down. There was not a person who could move from the spot where he had been standing—because there was no traction of his feet upon the floor. But there was no movement of a body's member which did not change the angle of the

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body to the floor and walls and ceiling. And there was the sensation of ghastly falling toward infinity. . . .

But Brent was anchored. His first shot had killed the skipper as the skipper's aim was made impossible by his lack of weight. There was bedlam. Crewmen, their faces contorted, tried to shoot, but they could not aim either. To move one's hand meant that one's body moved also, in the opposite direction. And the crew was half-mad anyhow.

Holding fast and steadied by his grip, Brent fired with complete ruthlessness. He found himself gripped, and Kit was steadying herself by him and shooting gallantly, too. And Den Harlow had not heard Brent's command in time to obey. But he floated calmly, and turned his wrist only, and deliberately pulled trigger when and only when his blaster bore upon a crewman with a blaster he was trying to use.

Brent bellowed:

"Throw your blasters away or every man dies!"

Six men threw down their blasters and bleated for mercy, in such a state of panic and horror that their cries were unintelligible.

Then Brent put his left hand back in his pocket and the ship's artificial gravity came back on. Passengers and crewmembers alike toppled to the floor from whatever position they had assumed with relation to it.

"Shannon!" barked Brent. "Pick up those blasters! Shoot any man who tries to get them again!"

Kit's father moved forward grimly to help. Kit pressed close against Brent, desperately ready to fire in his defense, until the crew members who survived were backed into one of the cabins and the door locked upon them with a key Shannon nonchalantly pulled out of his pocket.

"Now," said Brent, his eyes burning, "We've got to see if there are any more. They figured they had to yield to an unknown stowaway, but they weren't going to let anybody tell about them after he got off. Distribute those blasters where they'll do some good, Shannon! Who's coming with me to the control-room?"

BRENT surveyed the situation. The control-room was familiar enough, if old-fashioned. Panels of the wall were dented and smashed. Somebody had gone out of his head with panic. But the instrument-board was unharmed. Kit was close behind him, her brows knitted.

"Hm. . . ." said Brent. "I'm no astrogator, but I can manage after a fashion."

He pushed a button marked "General Communication." He spoke into a microphone.

"I am about to cut the overdrive once more," he said firmly, "to make sure we are headed for a planetary system. I will let you know what I find."

His voice would resound through every portion of the *Delilah's* fabric. The passengers might still be fearful, but that could not be helped.

Brent cut the drive. With the ship's main telescope he inspected the star straight ahead. He made quick estimates.

"We are within ten minutes' travel of a solar system," he said to the microphone. "I am going to take the *Delilah* there and land."

Into overdrive. He smiled at Kit. Then he said:

"Orders for former members of this ship's crew. Shannon, take the spacemen down to the exit-port. Have them carry all dead bodies of other space-men—no passengers. Have them ready to land."

He smiled again at Kit. Time passed, and passed, and passed. Brent threw off the drive. The stars sprang into being all around the ship. And they were amazingly close to a habitable world. Brent regarded it critically and said:

"Passengers will not land until all members of the crew are off. This is an order!"

He had no authority to give it, but there would be no protest.

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He swung the ship on her gyros. He let down, slowly at first but then with increasing confidence. Mountains appeared below. They swelled and grew large. He saw signs of cultivation—not intensive, but there were humans here.

He could see trees. He slowed the *Delilah's* rate of descent. Handling an unfamiliar ship, it was an uneasy business. Tree-branches and then tree-trunks crashed and crackled as the ship settled to the ground. Brent punched the exit-port speaker-button and ordered:

"Crew to ground, carrying all bodies of crew-members."

A light glowed on the panel. *"Exit Port Open."* Shannon had done that, or Kit's father. Only moments later Shannon's voice came:

"Crew all aground."

The *"Exit Port Open"* light faded. Brent gave the interplanetary drive his attention. The *Delilah* lifted once more. In seconds the blue sky turned purplish. Presently it was black, with many stars.

In half an hour, Brent turned off the drive. The *Delilah* floated on. He stared out the ports. The local sun was definitely sol-type and there were other planets. He used the main telescope. He said briefly: "That one is inhabited. Ice-caps and all the rest. Some oceans."

He began to operate the gyro controls to turn the ship. All the multitude of stars about the *Delilah* seemed to turn in a stately maneuver. He centered the planet. Then he carefully placed it a trifle away from the cross-hairs of the scope. He reached over and barely touched the overdrive. Space swirled and swirled again. They were in perfect landing-position. He sent the ship toward the second planet.

"We'll let the passengers off here," he said. "It's inhabited and they'll get along all right. But I don't get off. After all, the Profession's no advantage. It's an obligation. According to the law I'm a pirate for mutinying against the lawful skipper of this ship, and of course it's a capital offense to maroon anybody, as I just did to the survivors of the crew. I'm liable to prosecution for several murders, mutiny in space, marooning, piracy . . . and when the passengers tell their side of the story—I'm going to take the ship and go on off."

"I think that's the right thing," said Kit with conviction.

"You and your father will get word to Earth that there's almost certainly a matter-transmitter on Khem IV, and that what's happened to Procus and Sardin and Luxor and so on—you'll get the word back?"

"No," said Kit.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

He glanced out the bow-ports. The planet they neared was green and pleasing. It looked as if it would be a kindly world. There was at least one city. The passengers of the *Delilah* would want to land there. And most likely stay there.

"Anyhow," said Kit, "my father says you'll be trying to find Earth to take the news yourself. He's going to come along with you. So are the Shannons. I asked them to. There ought to be at least three or four men on a ship this size." Then she added irrelevantly, "Besides, my father likes you. Very much."

Brent swallowed.

Kit looked intently at her fingernails.

"It might be nice," she said slowly, "And—my father said—in case I should think of anything so foolish or so drastic—he's a Commerce Commissioner and so automatically a magistrate. He said if we wanted him to, he'd—he'd marry us."

The green globe ahead was a world that humans lived on all their lives. It was a nice world. It was an admirable world. It grew slowly larger as the *Delilah* drew nearer to it.

It was fortunate, though, that for some little while Brent didn't have to pay exclusive attention to the controls.

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

dio and TV comic, working on a script across the miniature lounge.

Jerry Bixby's eyes bulging as he sees the wing-tip flexing through a ten-foot arc: "I thought these goddam things were *solid!*"

Wouldn't have missed it for a million.

—S. M. & J. B.

ETHERGRAMS

ONE MIGHT think it relatively easy to write a letter to this column—that you either like something or you don't. But no—our scribes approach the subject with a posy in one hand and a brick in the other. As you lean over to sniff the flower—*boin-n-g* you get it from the brick. But don't worry, these scars will fade in twenty or thirty years. . . .

UNGUESSABLE FUTURE

by David M. Campbell

Dear Mr. Mines: You are the most outspoken of a group of science fiction editors currently proclaiming a new era, namely one of maturity. In some respects, you are the most justified in that it has been under your editorship that the Thrilling magazines have reached new peaks of excellence.

However, I see in this new growth of s-f a regrettable trend, perhaps a product of my age, perhaps an actual loss. You may not agree with me; I rather suspect you will not. Your reply shall be looked forward to with interest.

I first started reading science fiction at the age of eleven in 1945. In 1945, science fiction was nectar and ambrosia for an eleven year old. I like to think I have been growing up with science fiction, for as I groped toward maturity, so did science fiction. Our development was correspondingly parallel.

Yet at the age of eighteen, I cannot honestly say I am mature. There is a feeling of adulthood trying to corrupt the bittersweet pangs of adolescence, but adulthood, maturity, are still in the unguessable future.

But science fiction is calling itself a grownup. But if that worthy and I both grew out of short pants at the same time and neither of us found the other outgrowing him (and such is the case I hasten to assure you), how has adulthood been achieved by one and not the other?

True, science fiction is older than I, but was not the postwar era the real birth of modern science fiction, and were not the years before its childhood, babyhood and pre-natal period?

Before I continue, if you are still listening with an open mind, please remember when we speak of science fiction today, we are blanketing with a generalization a very large feild with its extremes and means. What I have to say must suffer the fate of all generalities: it can be disproven by the extremes. Let us therefore use STARTLING and TWS as our models for the whole field (I obviously can't decide how to spell feild.).

Science fiction is an adolescent, not an adult. It is just starting to become interested in sex and is not quite sure what to do about it. Did you not begin a campaign in TEV and in your editorials months in advance that would prepare your readers for THE LOVERS? And will not the reaction to that story be a confused one? By the time this sees print (IF) THE LOVERS letters will have been printed, and I predict a very large streak of immaturity will spread itself across the pages of your letter columns, and that the sane, sensible responses will be in the minority.

All that has really changed in sf are the dialogue and the pace of action. The plots are still the same. The material is still mostly escapists. The taboos have been stretched in one direction only. Thinking is only rarely encouraged. Why is so much, why is 99% of science fiction concerned with war and fighting? Science fiction still has not placed the real empsasis on people nor has it yet begun to realize its own teriffic potentialities.

These are the markings of youth. You are not yet literature. I would use THE LOVERS as an example, but this letter is long enough. I've made some blanket charges, which I would be glad to elaborate in later letters if they would be welcomed.

I love science-fiction, which is why I would like to see it grow up. The very fact that it thinks it has is proof of its immaturity; what would be nice is a workable, agreed upon definition of immaturity and maturity. You are a better editor than Merwin. You put out a better magazine than he ever did. STARTLING is the best in its field. (That's not soft soaping you either!)—*418 High St., Closter, N. J.*

Nobody has said—quote—science fiction is now mature—unquote. We agree it is in rompers rather than high heels. But thank Ghu it is out of the diaper stage at least. We've got to be sure it gets enough vitamins to grow up and doesn't stay where it is, or go back to what it was, as some die-hards insist. We don't mean to indulge in a lot of back-patting about a precocious maturity. We have issued one clear clarion call for more maturity, we have asked for it and fought for it—but this is not the same as saying we *have* it. We have made a step or two in that direction—you agreed THE LOVERS was a step forward. The huge streak of immaturity you expected from the ensuing letters didn't materialize, incidentally. All together there were about four letters out of hundreds which griped.

However, more has changed in science fiction than dialogue and pace. The ideas which are

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the subject of today's speculation would have been unthinkable ten years ago. And what action stuff is still used has a place; there is always a place for good escapist entertainment. Stay with us, write as many gripes as you like and you'll help that growth you'd like to see.

BLONDES PREFERRED

by Bill Bailey

Dear Sam, (if I may be so bold as to utter a familiarity in my first letter): You amaze me! Why, man! You leave yourself wide open for all kinds of verbal antagonism and come out ahead. How, in the name of ol' Sol do you do it? You pick out weak spots in your opponents' arguments, use them to parry their thrust, and create an opening with them for a lunge of your own. And to crown it all you leave them defeated, but happy. In my book that's the mark of top notch writing.

Which brings me to the point of this messed up missive. Why, Sam, don't I see a good fiction yarn in ol' SS written by one Samuel Mines? I know you can do it and besides, think of all the comment it would arouse on TEV.

I first started reading SS about a year or so ago. It was raining—need I say more?

Sam, you have the dubious honor of being the first editor to whom I've ever written. Oh yes, I've had impulses before, but the inspiration died for want of ambition.

Now just in case this letter is put into print (which I doubt, but I'd appreciate an answer if you have any spare time) I want all of the fen and BEM to note; If you write, don't expect an answer unless you're pretty, 5'2" or 3", seventeen or eighteen, female (preferably blonde, but I'm not choosy), intelligent and witty. It would also endear that person to me if she is the favorite niece of a dying uncle who has a couple million skins begging to be put back into circulation.

I've got a very (to me) important question. Who is this Seibel that most of the fen write about? "Hold on," you say, "this character says he read our mag for a year and he doesn't know who Seibel is?" The truth is, I've just discovered, so to speak, TEV. Formerly, I'd never glance at the letter column. WHAT HAVE I BEEN MISSING?

But, Sam, I just discovered (quite by accident) a mag that I like, even better than Startling (sob as lil Abner would say). This mag is Space Stories —wait—lets look 'n see who's—SAMMY boy am I glad to see you! This letter is not in vain YIPPEEEE!

Phew, above, you see the (misbegotten) fruits of my labor. I am an exhausted man. I doubt if I have enough strength left to finish this paragraph so I'll close with this grain of wisdom: today's stf-tomorrows fact. (original, no?—)—*4702 Furley Ave., Balto. 6, Md.*

P.S. seriously, thanx for the best stf on the market.

P.P.S. xcuze the mistakes, this damn typewriter jest ain't got no eddycashun:

You say you want an answer, but after reading the letter three times we can't find any questions to answer. Besides, all this flattery has went to our heads (?) and we are speechless.

WOLF BAIT

by Frederick B. Christoff

Dear Sam: Prepare yourself for a shock. I am now a full-fledged fan. After obtaining knowledge on how a true fan behaves from the letter columns of SS and TWS, I set out to conduct myself accordingly.

I approached the little woman (that's an understatement) and growled, "I'se gonna buy a book."

To which she replied, "Not another of those silly science-fiction books?"

Whereupon I promptly beat the daylights out of her, threw her mother down the stairs and strangled the cat. Not having a cane, I twirled the cat around my fingers as I sauntered down to the store. Walking in, I asked the prop for an issue of SS. For some strange reason he ran screaming hysterically from the store. I helped myself to an SS and left a counterfeit quarter in payment. All according to the rules of fandom.

Reaching home again, I placed the mag on the table and got the baseball bat which I had prepared for the occasion. Then I started to beat hell out of the mag. Twenty minutes and $250 worth of furniture later I decided it was time for the second stage.

Taking the mag to the back of the house where I keep a large pack of wolves (I used to feed some of the neighborhood brats to them but after several of my pets took sick I had to abstain from this practice and since it was about six months since they had eaten they were beginning to look hungry) I tossed them the mag, which they seized and started to devour. Three minutes later they died a most agonizing death.

I sat among their remains and started to read the letters. Then I read ASYLUM EARTH and I realized why my pets had died.

All in all, Sam, there were just two things wrong with this issue. One: ASYLUM EARTH; two: THE GUIDED MAN. De Camp is supposed to be funny? I've had more fun at a funeral.

At long last you've added poetry to the mag. S'wonnerful. The cover was beautiful. Is Coggins new or have I just missed him before?

Wonder if Bob Fultz has any himself? Imagine him saying he wished Merwin was back. I started buying SS again only because there was a new editor. Orchids to you, Sam.

Now, still in the tradition of fandom I shall say: all in all, it was a wonderful issue; every story a classic. Keep up the good work and you will continue to get my counterfeit quarters. Any fans want to write me? — *39 Cameron St. S., Kitchener, Ont., Canada.*

Must have been those untrimmed edges that choked your Chihuahuas to death. They do have a way of getting caught in your teeth. It couldn't have been ASYLUM EARTH because that was lab-tested—*yes, lab-tested* before publication. We took selected not-made-ready copies, fed one into a Siamese kitten two weeks old, shredded another and slipped it into a robin's nest where it was promptly fed to the roblings and tested the third by getting it onto the menu at a girl's finishing school.

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Results: The Siamese cat moulted twice that summer and chased every dog in the neighborhood up a tree (thus teaching them to climb). The robins took off and flew two weeks earlier than normal, were last seen dive-bombing the four-motor planes at La Guardia and daring them to come up and fight. And the girls finishing school—? Well, uh, we've had the phone disconnected and the NO VISITORS sign up for two weeks; the doors have been reinforced and—wait, let's see—yes, they're still out there—we'll have to slide down the rope outside the window again tonight. . . .

CLARK POPPS A CALK

by Douglas O. C. Clark

Dear Sam: What the H is the idea using Walter Popp as a cover artist when you have Schomburg and Bergey? Your mag needs him like it needs a hole in the head. I thought you said you were going to try a Virgil Finlay cover. Where is it?

In the September ish, SS, there was a letter by Gregg Calkins telling you where to send Bergey. If you send anyone, send Calkins. The way Calkins talks, FA and AS are cuss words. Phooey, they are just written for a different level of readers. Occasionally they come out with some darn good stories.

Sam, ol' boy! I'm still waiting for that Leigh Brackett novel. Hey, kid! Think you can get us a van Vogt novel or novelet? I'm sure your readers would appreciate it and tell you so. So long before I'm scalped. —*Pacific, Missouri.*

Last time we saw Gregg Calkins he was busy trying to keep a rubber nose pasted over his own at the Chicon's masquerade party. Probably interfered with his breathing because he couldn't say anything—just made sounds like a fish in a barrel. On him the nose looked good. But before you sell out your interest in Popp, better catch the next issues of SS and TWS. Did you see the December TWS, by the way? Nice clean job by Popp, haven't seen anything better around. As for Finlay, we're keeping him so busy with interiors that the heavier work of planning a cover never gets to first base. Sorry. For Leigh Brackett novel, watch SPACE STORIES.

LOGIC AGAIN

by P. Mathieu

Dear Editor:

I like TEV
But oh, I wish
The fans would stop writing
"Illo" and "Ish."

"Illo" can perhaps be defended; it is at least melodious, and it may save time for busy editors. But your correspondents are not editors and certainly not busy—to judge by the amount of time they have to spend writing these interminable letters. However, perhaps they are just too lazy to write short letters, which is much more difficult.

But "ish" for "issue"—what good is it? It saves no time worth mentioning. It is ugly. Any cheap sparkle it ever had has worn off in a thousand repetitions. It is now just a tiresome way of trying to sound smart.

As for the voluptuous blondes on magazine covers, sex is a dandy institution. Perish the thought of deriding, hiding, or abolishing it. But—logic is a wonderful thing too; and when I see a pleasingly-curved nymph braving the chills of Pluto or the leeches of Venus clad in a next-to-nothing costume, while the gentleman who is menacing or rescuing her is muffled to the chin, wrapped stoutly in garments wholly suitable to extreme climates—then I look at this incongruous pair and I am forced to one of two conclusions. Either he is a weakling, a decadent, a mamma's boy obviously unqualified for the rigors of the larger universe; or the lady is soft in the head, to come out in such weather in such clothes. Neither idea, of course, does justice to the noble pair beyond the cover; and I dislike being disillusioned in advance about my heroes and heroines. —*c/o H.C.H.S., 645 Greenwich Street, New York 14.*

What good are illo and ish? And why fanzine instead of fan magazine, and prozine, and femfen instead of fans of the female gender? It's not the saving of time—it's the poetry. Illo and ish have a swing and a rhythm and femfen is music compared to female fans. Is there no poetry in your soul, me bhoy?

Where picture is illo
And issues are ish
With a bow to Petrillo
This music's my dish

Hey, ma, look, I'm dancing!

LINE FORMS ON RIGHT

by Mary Dickinson

Dear Ed: Is there room in your little ole letter column for one redhead little ole girl (22) to get her two cents in?

I have been reading SS for three years and I think it is just too wonderful for words, especially the cute letters all those nice boys write to the Ethergrams.

Do you think it is really proper to discuss sex in a magazine like that and specially about brother and sister marriages—ooh, goodness. I like the editor's views best.

There doesn't seem to be many letters from ladies in Ethergrams, how come? Some of the readers seem to be awfully belligerent. I don't understand why but if they want to fight, I'll draw up my five foot seven inches and 113½ pounds and pen, and give them a real tussle. Imagine anyone complaining about such a lovely magazine as STARTLING. Oh, dear.

I don't think the girls—or boys—in the illustrations are too undressed. I have some nice little playsuits myself and they are nice and cool and

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comfy in the hot summer weather and you ought to see my bathing suits. I got two like the French girls wear in the magazines and they're wonderfully comfortable to swim in and the boys like them too.

Do any of the readers have any old science fiction magazines they would give me for free? I'm just dying to get some from the 1920's and 30's. I've missed so much. I would just love to have any back numbers.

The October issue of STARTLING was just delightful. I sat right down and read the whole thing through right away, after I'd read the letters in Ethergrams first, of course. I would like to hear from some of the nice boys that write to Ethergrams, girls too if they want to bother. — *165 York St., Bangor, Maine.*

All right, fellows, we saw her first!

SHOCKERS AND LEERS
by M. A. Southworth

Dear Sam: First off I'll say you edit a terrific mag. Bet that sounds sweet to your ears and while I'm in a complimenting mood I'll also say I like your new covers. The main reason being that I'll be able to read them in school without getting leers from the fellows and shocked looks from the teachers.

How did you manage to snare Walter Miller Jr.? I thought Asf had a monopoly on him. His story, GRAVESONG had an ironic twist to it.

Flowers to J. B. Wood on THE OUTCOME. Civilization take warning!

As to the earlier ish of your mag that contained ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD by Clarke, it made the stf t-v show TALES OF TOMORROW or didn't the fen realize that.

To sum it all up: very readable.

One more thing, would any fans in and around the Detroit area 14 or over please write me?

Thanks Sam. — *1125 Larkmoor, Berkley, Mich.*

Honest, we can't help it. The letters just come in that way, laden with posies. Mailman has been complaining about the heavy compliments. We have to hunt for a letter which waxes sarcastic and you think they're easy to find? Wait, we'll print a few of those shorts we've been saving; that'll do it.

Seeing ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD on "Tales Of Tomorrow" was no surprise to us. There will be more stories from SS and TWS on the show. Did you know that "Tales" won an award for its presentation of A CHILD IS CRYING, which is from TWS? Yuk, yuk.

PLENTY OF SPACE
by Ray Capella

Dear Mines: Gadzooks! When I'm about to stick my head out and cry "Space opera"—to the outraged stares of the audience—ol' Sam whops me with SPACE STORIES. This boy got an answer for ever-thing.

By that I imply that we young-uns get overloaded with the so-called "slick" stf so much we have to cry "Space oprea—ugh—opera" Something well-written and long, like Vance or Hamilton (huzzah!). But anyhow, I suppose you could call BIG PLANET the type of yarn I'm calling for, but that is "not egg-zackly what I got in mind."

So much for the request—we'll leave it to SPACE. Leave us go on to one Bob Fultz—whose letter you pubbed in the October SS—a letter for which he should hang his head in shame—or mebbe in Timbuctoo. Anyhow, *he* say only a few short stories have struck him out of what's been going in SS . . . the only thing I seem to agree on with him is that PASSPORT TO PAX *could* have been much better.

Then he say the letters in TEV are the goshwowboyoboy type! How could he? (Oh gall! Bitter bitter wormwoods!) Bob, boy, haven't you noticed? Why—it's not only the mags 'n editors who are "slick"—nowadays even the letters are mature. They speak of nothing but controversies on sex, art, the population on Earth as related to space-travel *and* How to Construct Mature Science Fiction.

They also discuss previous letters (they do this very often nowadays) in previous issues—like I'm doing. Matter of fact, the only goshwowboyoboy type letters in SS are mine—and get in 'cause I sneak in some brilliant, scintillating statement now and then. Of course, they are *modest* statements. (Aside to Dave English: "How's *your* sparkling wit?")

Remember my misgivings 'bout SS going monthly? Bob seems to back 'em here, but somehow, I feel I'm getting the wrong type of backing—after all. *I'm* assuredly not sorry you took over, Sam. After all, you gave us Elliot's ASYLUM EARTH—an old plot, but this was powerful! Nope, I'm not displeased with SS a-tall. Even with that cover-change. Hmm—I'm beginning to repeat myself. I'd better go on my merry way. . . .

"I came like Water, and like
Wind I go."

—480 Clinton Ave., Brooklyn 16, N. Y.

Such forthright frankness is highly commendable in the young. So you gets overloaded with slick stf, does you? Even in spite of a HELL-FLOWER or TROUBLED STAR every now and then? For you SPACE STORIES was born. Note: a Jack Vance in the second issue and a Leigh Brackett in the third—solid space opera. Also SPS is recommended for some of the 13-year-olds whose mothers won't let them read THE LOVERS.

TIME OUT
by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Dear Sam: First let me explain what I meant when I implied that you were "enough like Merwin" to succeed him as my favorite editor. Under Merwin's leadership, STARTLING climbed from a fifth-rate slopsheet to a top-quality adventure fantasy magazine; Merwin, as a symbol of that change, in addition to his own inimitable personality, was

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my favorite editor. Nobody could guess with what trepidation I saw him leave the helm of our favorite magazine. However (and please forgive me for saying, much to my surprise) STARTLING maintained its old high standard and even climbed to new heights in maturity, enterprise and literary standards of quality. Therefore I assume that you are equally competent—and I know from personal experience that you are equally nice to deal with. Q.E.D.—you are still my favorite editor. Okay?

ASYLUM EARTH, although I didn't like it much as a story, contained one very thought-provoking idea—that too-elaborate toys are stunting the imagination of our children. Television, too-great dependence on visual aids in teaching, are reducing appreciation for the written word, the supremely imaginative, to a minimum. I believe this is the main reason for the rise of fantasy and science-fiction as a literary form; it is the last refuge for a vivid imagination in a world of too-concrete realities.

Pardon me if this is short and sweet—I'm taking time out in the midst of writing a book. 'Bye now, and when will Brackett write us another novel?—*Box 246, Rochester, Texas.*

Very sharp, to have picked that little analogy of the too-elaborate-toys-for-children out of ASYLUM EARTH. It wasn't obvious. There were several provocative ideas in that story, incidentally; it had tendrils reaching into all sorts of byways of the human psyche.

My own experiences with young children back you up fully on the too-elaborate toys business. They become surfeited and bored much more easily when such complicated methods are used to keep them entertained; whereas the children who have nothing but a clothespin and a pot lid for toys create their own entertainment by the exercise of their imaginations. They seem to get along better and are less demanding.

But so far as television goes, I have noticed that after an initial period of great curiosity about it, children are apt to lose some interest and go back to their books, pencils, drawing and handicrafts. Those who have any creative impulse (and I think this is most of them) begin to itch from the inactivity of sitting still and watching. Sooner or later they turn back to more creative play.

SHEER LUXURY

by (Miss) T. Marsh

Dear Sam: I have been a science fiction fam (female for fan) all of my reading life and have never before indulged myself in the luxury of writing to any readers' column. But all this discussion about us women being "dumpy" has got me up in arms. (Whose arms?—Ed.) I am an average American female and even if I don't have all the charm of a Lana Turner or Rita Hayworth I still don't like being "dumped." 'Nuff said.

Are there any fan clubs here in Atlantic City? How can I get information on the subject?

Another thing I'd like to discuss: since science fiction is supposed to be fiction and fact, let's not take all the romance out of it. But please don't have all the women always in trouble and fainting all over the galaxy. Contrary to popular belief there are a few women with practical minds and that pioneer spirit.

Now that I have gotten safely past the controversial subjects please let me add that I like your mag and over a period of years I have found many interesting and unusual stories between your covers. And speaking of covers, I do like your new format. —*223 So. Rhode Island Ave., Atlantic City, N. J.*

Nobody has denied the pioneer spirit to the deadlier sex; in fact we have often pointed out to scoffers who decry women in space ships that where men go their women trot along. You always find women in the roughest and most unlikely places, and we have no doubt they'll be in space ships too. But this has nothing to do with the discussion of their beauty. We simply made the point, with scientific detachment, that long-stemmed beauties are relatively few, that the average female is dumpy. So don't believe me—take it up with your local museum of Natural History. Which, of course, doesn't mean we're "dumping" you, T. Marsh. Come along for the ride. If you guarantee that pioneer spirit.

TIRED STENCH

by Ralph K. Wade
Ass't Editor, THE PHOENIX

Dear Editor: I take time out from my other tasks to write you this gem of a letter. Though I'm a noble and staunch reader of STARTLING, and any and all others in the Pro field and many of the fans, I have reached the opinion that staunch is turning to stench . . .

Even the best of plots grow old and tired. I loved the action in the BIG PLANET. How does one get one of those room servants as per the Mansion? I'd gladly swap off jobs with any one like the one described. BUT . . . .

The stuff used in the yarn is old OLD *OLD*. All of the holes are patched and worn through again. The traps they fell into are stock and escapes predicted by some 3 pages. It takes a good author to sell an old, loose tale like that one and Vance is just the one to do it. He could write a Jack and the Beanstalk and sell it. He's way out there.

Poetry is a little out of my line. The last time I read some, I had a bad accident, I got married. UGH! Who said anything about *old* stuff? But here is my ODE to any and all who care to hear it.

Ode To the Rocketmen

Here comes the noble Rocketman
To where all trouble's brewed.
He chases villains, Bug eyed BEMS,
And wimmin, mostly nude.

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With Proton guns and fists of Iron,
He knocks the villains cold.
Though he's come light years, ten times ten,
He's never to grow old?

He can Franisturb a Basalplate
In forty different ways.
And walk in nothing but his shorts,
Through miles of Cosmic rays.

As slaves, on an airless planetoid
He and She are sold.
They kiss, their fillings generate.
With electricity, who's cold?

Hoo Ray the noble Rocketman
He's went and saved the day.
He got the villain in the end.
The girl got away.

Incidentally. The cover girls. As long as the girls don't catch cold and don't complain, why should I? But I am a member of KEEP SEX IN THE BEDROOM AND NOT IN THE SF MAGS. — *4222 W. Cambridge, Phoenix, Arizona.*

We *told* you and *told* you no poetry, didn't we? Okay, so you've got yourself to blame. We now haul off and paste you with a triplet:

"No nudes!" they chide
And then they print
Fanzines full of female hide.

You like? So suffer, you asked for it. Here's a quatrain:

"Your stories make us gag,
"Your illos make us perk,
"So You can take your rag
"And—keep up the good work."

Had enough? We have.

HARD TIMES A'COMIN'

by Patricia Kovacs

Dear Sam: Just got the October ish of SS. I have only read the letter column so far, but that's all I want to comment on anyway.

Look, I know Joe Gibson has probably given you some hard times, but is that any reason for cutting out his letter? Joe usually says something worth reading. Delete anyone's letters but not Joe's.

I agree . . . let's have some MEN in the illustrations, not those walking bundles of laundry that have been the fashion up to now. Some men *are* sexy-looking brutes but not according to the Brotherhood of SF Artists. After all, Charles Atlas stripped and look where it got him.

I would like to refer Jim Leake to "MAN: an Autobiography" by George R. Stewart. I think this book deserves a plug. Are you familiar with it, Sam? It ties in well with Mr. Leake's ideas although it might not always agree with him.

That's all. — *119 N. Sutphin Street, Middletown, Ohio.*

"Walking bundles of laundry?" Oh, great. Looks like we will have to send all our artists to Charles Atlas.

As for Joe Gibson, the situation is simple. We just took a vow to run no more Gibson letters, thass all.

THE LITTLE MAN WHO WAS THERE

by Joe Gibson

Dear Sam: You'll be commenting on the Chicon, and Bixby will be commenting on the Chicon, so move over already and stop hogging the limelight. Gibson was there! Yeh, I heard some fan's remark that Gibson must be the little man who shuts the light off in the icebox; another identified me as the rock the Blue Girl was hiding behind during the ballet. I coulda told 'em about flying saucers!

But there was one fault about the con. It was a technical error more than anything, I think—and that was having the Terrace Casino as the convention hall. It was big enough (a sort've ampitheater with tables rising on tiers around the stage) and certainly made nicer surroundings than I've heard mentioned about earlier cons. But it was so big, and sprawled out so much, that the conchairman didn't have any control. The result was twofold: first, more went on in the audience than on the stage, and second, the spirit of the thing rapidly became an "everybody for himself" attitude with local fan-groups withdrawing to themselves and not much intermingling. I saw quite a few "lone wolves" who hadn't been able to attend with any local group wandering around there looking lost. At times, I felt kinda lost myself. There was just nothing to weld the con into a solid group; they were left to drift off to themselves.

Attending any stf conventoin is like reading magazines, tho. Y'have to wade thru a load of crud to find the good stuff. But generally, I'd say there were three groups or categories of fans: those who get drunk at cons, those who discuss science-fiction at cons, and those who get drunk and discuss science-fiction. Of course, you also have struggling, young authors prowling around in search of editors. And some of the femme fans I know remarked upon a few characters they ran into—and away from. Then, too, we got fans like Hank Burwell, that Atlanta bhoy, who's deep in a discussion of a stf approach to racial problems one night, and shows up the next morning with a roll big as a wad of corn pone, fans 'em out, tens, twenties, a mess of fives (some bhoys just d-r-u-g him into a li'l ole crap-game last night; *awful* nice bunch of fellas) and he jerks out a few messy, old ones, shakes 'em, and sneers at 'em—

Joe Semenovich was there. And Shelby Vick was wandering around looking sheepish—while I was looking at all those cute, vivacious, petite femme fans who were bouncing merrily around the place. And Bill Venable was there; you know Bill. He has a beautiful sister even Gibson didn't know about! I am now writing for fanzines again. Well-l-l-l, *a* fanzine.

And the Coles were there. But the biggest disappointment to me, and I'm serious about this, was all the fans who weren't there—who couldn't make it. It's going to be in Philadelphia next year, kids. Start saving up a kitty; you're the ones who really make a fan convention—you, the fans. We needja. — *24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.*

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Real touching, Joe. Do you know that some of the fam (female fans) think you wear a halo? Like a Crossen character yet. You're our last hope, kid.

ARMAGEDDON
by Richalex Kirs

Dear Mr. Mines: I delayed writing this mostly because my mind wouldn't accept the fact of what has happened to Startling's cover. Even now I feel a trifle let down and bewhildered. (Bewitched, Bothered and Bemildred, who were bats. That's from Pogo. See, I know Pogo too. I yam a true fan.) If the pics on the cover were only a trifle larger, I suppose the neofans would cut them out, frame em, and hang em on the wall. Gee, I wish I wuz a neofan.

But, back to what passes for business in the Tittilating Ether. (I sorta like that a little better than E.V. Kinda more sexy.) The cover, its arrangement, lettering etc., is a great improvement over the former style. The only trouble is that *Galaxy* was the one to start it, quite some time ago. And in the interval between *Galaxy's* appearance and S.S's transformation, all the little blunderzines happily made the change to the style set by *Galaxy*. And now STARTLING STORIES hops into the caboose on the copycats gravytrain.

Now, nobody but a newszine editor can fortell the future, but I sorta shudder and flinch at the vision of going into the drugstore and being confronted by rank upon rank of identical mags, identical, that is, except for slightly different lettering. With perhaps *Planet Stories* standing out in untouched, jewel-like splendor.

And, I dislike the prospect of standing before this array of multuplets, little pinky extended, chanting "eeny, meeny, miny, moe." You see, from covers to editorial policy is but a short step. Around two or three pages, at the most. I can visualize the fen flocking to *Planet*, the money pouring into the coffers of that unchangeable zine, (I am not speaking of the editorial turnover.) while the unsold copies of the multuplets snow their publishers under. Then *Planet* finally gets enough money to conform. *Blooey*. Fandom totters upon its tentacles, then collapses upon the heads of the Coles and Hoffman, while Sabretooth Seigel burrows frienzidly beneath, in the role of The Demolished Fan.

Horrible prospect, no? — *1441 Overing Street, Bronx 61, New York*.

P.S. SEMENOVICH!!! — I am not, never was, and never will be, a "nice chap". Yuh wanta ruin my reputayshun?

Poo, you hop to too many conclusions. The way the new cover format was designed for SS was like this: Big conference—artists, art director, editors, managing editor—everybody. "Let's have ideas for a new cover." Everybody gets a pencil and scribbles. Eighteen hours later the table is covered with sketches and doodles, three wastebaskets are full of pencil stubs, worn down crayons and chewed up paintbrushes. The cleaning lady is leaning on her mop and muttering, "Ain't you guys never gonna go home?" She makes a couple of tired swishes on the floor with the wet mop. The art director pounces. "That's it! We got it! The new design! Don't anybody step on it!"

The cleaning lady gets a generous bonus—a free copy of STARTLING STORIES autographed by the editors. A new cover is born.

See?

A LITTLE INCEST
by Gerald A. Steward

Dear Sam: Well we are back. Not to write one of those cruddy letters, which to our misfortune, were published in earlier issues of SS and TWS. But to bring up a point.

We haven't read the stories yet. We were prompted to write this epistol by a letter from one Jim Leake, published in T.E.V., S.S., Vol 27, No. 3, Oct. 52.—pages 139-40.

Mr. Leake's letter points out that the Inca race did a considerable bit of Brother-Sister inbreeding and produced offsprings capable of ruling the empire, and not decadence.

This may be all well and true, but when it comes to inbreeding we know fairly well whereof we speak. Our mother breeds, raises, and sells Siamese cats as a hobby.

We have found that by breeding brother and sister we will get either very good kittens or very poor ones. If the brother and sister are of very good type, color, body build, etc., their offsprings will be superior to them. But, if on the other hand, the brother and sister are poor, their kittens will be worse yet.

Take another form of inbreeding, namely mother-son. This generally produces a very malformed and physically weak offspring. In one instance, when we bread mother-son we got a very good kitten. Except that the kitten did not have enough strength to stand on its feet. It died a couple of days afer birth.

A third form of inbreeding is father to daughter. This for some unknown reason usually produces the exact opposite to the mother-son combination. Furthermore, character and type become *set* in this type of breeding.

For example, suppose you take a male Siamese cat of very good eye color, (saphire blue), and breed it to its daughter, also of very good eye color, their offspring will have the most beautiful blue eyes you ever saw in your life. And this will hold generation after generation. Unfortunately this holds true in the reverse, any bad points become set also, and good or bad, they are damn hard to breed out. You will always get the occasional through-back.

This seems to hold true in animals so why not humans? If the Incas bred brother to sister, they should have got exceptionally good or very decadent children, depending on the parents. Mother-son breeding would always go for the worst, with the very odd exception. Father-daughter breeding is similar to brother sister, except that the good or bad character, intelligence, etc., of the parent becomes set for generations to come.

Thanks for hearing me out, Sam. Oh yes, we agree with your argument on beauty and after reading many letters about sex-in-science-fiction we

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have changed our mind. We still feel that sex is an unnecessary factor, but we have decided to let you use your judgement on when, where and how much is needed. We'll go along with you and we feel we can't go wrong.

Lee Huddleston: You have a problem. You don't want Sam Mines. You want Dorothy Dix. However, we see three solutions. (1) Faye can go on reading stf in secret whenever the aunt isn't around (2) the editor can stop putting semi-clad babes on the cover (3) Faye can leave her aunt and live elsewhere.

The last solution is to be used only in emergency. Solution number two will likely never come true. It seem that the crudzines have to rely on sexy covers to sell the mag. The better ones sell on quality of story. To us SS and TWS rate up with the top ones. Why they need the sexy cover we don't know. — *166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto 10, Ont. Canada.*

You go back and read a lot of these letters again and note the growing clamor from femfen (fam) for more males less bundled up and see what you get. It's just hoo-man nature you're dealing with. Those experiments with cats sound to me like a lot of incest, no?

THE WOLF OF THE HILLS
by Jim Leake

Señor Sam: I almost did it; I so nearly did it I still quake in me b-hoots; I shiver and shake, and go on t-hoots. It just shows to go, if a man is serious about liking a magazine, he damn well better subscribe, so here's my three bucks. What, you may well ask, catatonic-tastrophy happened to pry a practical, practising, tighwad of a bachelor loose from so much (enough to pay the taxes on a jug of corn) moola? Simple; I almost missed THE LOVERS. Superb, exquisite, etc. etc. ("big fleas have lesser fleas, upon their backs to bite 'em; little fleas have littler fleas, so on ad infinitum" as my organic prof used to say). A story I would not have missed. The most peculiar thing to me about it is the way the dominant theme, the theocracy, held the center stage, even when in the background, during reading of it, yet faded out so that the delicate aura of love dominated the memory of the piece. You'll go a long way, Señor, before you beat that, I'm a thinkin'. Yet BIG PLANET was an excellent piece of reading too; no wonder I've quit buying any other stf recently. TWS can't begin to touch SS, it seems, yet whenever I get a copy I find I modify that sentiment. How you do it?

A registered vote against Cap Future. He did fine in his place, but has no spot at all whatsoever in SS or, TWS as they now stand. And may I point out to any and all of his admirers that a good look at the personality as depicted in various stories of said Cap Foot is the major thing in the way of his ever becoming a character of sufficient maturity and complexity to warrant a place in today's SS or TWS; he is drawn as, well, not exactly a misanthrope, but a man who, through lack of contact with people, has no basic understanding of people as we all know us; he's been driven by an interior drive to hobo about the universe seeking Mankind's birthplace; very interesting, yup, but it's implicit in the picture drawn that his type story will never be much more than fancy, spruced up, gadgetry, with a lot of twists thrown in. Not enough knowlege of personality to enable a successful story to be written involving him in personality problems, without which a story is not much more than advanced gadgeteering, and, while I like gadgeteering as well as the next man, if I wanted to read it I'd buy Amazing and such like.

Another loud, resounding, echoing, ecstatic cheer for the new cover layout. Excellent stories, excellent cover—tell me, amigo, is it true you still have competition? Be careful you don't run it off; I'd hate to see SS or TWS get involved in the deadly red tape of a Congressional investigation—Congress seems to be awful busy investigating all kinds of capitalistic enterprises these days. (Thought: Is it only because we are running to socialism as hard as we can go that they don't investigate the Governmental record?)

Don't let guys like that-ary Bob Fultz worry you; he just happened to get the wrong 'zine; probably reaching for the distorted thing-a-mabob that goes by the name of Comic Book when he latched on to SS. Why, *I*, bygosh, can remember when Comics were *funny* (there I go dating myself again) . . . can't you, Sam? As a matter of fact, when you took over, the only letter department that could go you one better was *Planet*, and quick as Bix left, it also slid a little. Haven't even seen a copy in months; did they go out of business or sumpum? While ladling out the praise, may I state that the cover of the August ish (I think it was August; I loaned the mag, and, since my rifle needs cleaning I haven't yet tried to get it back) depicting the spirit of THE LOVERS was magnificent. What if it did not follow faithfully the details of a scene from the story? It certainly illustrated the spirit of the story wonderfully. Of course, the fact that I took ye ed's advice and read the story before I did the Vibrating Ether may account in part for my enthusiastic response: "Editor knows best". (Sounds too much like the recurrent "Mother knows best" in the Oct. ish).

To revert to the current debate: Although women very definitely are ornamental, a boost to the male ego, etc. etc., they are too dad-blamed smart to be given any big hello's; keep 'em in the background, boys, OR ELSE! Having studied feminine psychology for many years now, I have arrived at the earth-shattering conclusion that it is bad for men; that the only safe and sane man is a qualified misogynist (yeah; I know that sounds like a "contradiction of terms") and that the olde bhoys had the right idea: keep your women ornamental and useful, but never let them take a positive hand in things. The fact that the olde bhoys didn't succeed in so doing is not to be considered at this writing; it merely shows to go that men of that age lacked the penetrating insight into the female psyche that we now have. (I hope).

Leave us all shed a bitter tear for Joe Semenovich; the poor dear lad failed to get printed (he tells us—never missed him) in one ish. Tsk, tsk. The world is rapidly approaching its doomsday. I pondered for many lurid hours over the question of why you, Sam, an otherwise intelligent man, printed letters such as those of this character and that "coyote Seibel". After much belaboring of my brain, I arrived at the conclusion that this type

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letter is a hangover from Sarge Saturn (whom I never managed to get through more than once or twice).

I don't know how long you can keep it up, Sam, but I'll bet on it. Here's to you . . . the best! — *1120 Euclid Ave., Bristol, Va.*

You ever had any success keeping women in the background, Jim?

SBBM-MCTH
by Stephanie Szold

Dear Mr. Mines: Congratulations on one of the best science fiction magazine issues I've ever seen. However, before you elatedly think you have a stf connoisseur of long standing on your hands let me admit I've only been "caught" for about three years. Still, especially as all new fen do, I've read everything I could get my hands on, so I think I have a fairy good background for my statement.

I'm speaking of your Septmeber issue, which I hope I'm not too late to comment on. I've seldom read an stf issue (unless it was aSF, GSF or F&SF, if you'll pardon the mention of competitors) that I really enjoyed from beginning to end, certainly never from what is known as a pulp mag. In every pulp one seems to run up against at least one story per issue that was written by the landlord of the editorial offices, run in at the last moment to fill in empty space, or used for some other reason that completely eludes me. But in your September S.S. I really found every story right at the top of your level. I won't say I thought they were all great writing, or musts for hard bound editions, but they all were thoroughly enjoyable, which, after all is the keystone of a story.

I thought your guest editorial by Mr. Leinster particularly good. (But then what else would you expect from a writer of his standing?) May I make my own humble addition? If there had only been as much literature anticipating the industrial revolution as there is now anticipating space flight, I believe the world would be in a much better condition than it now is. People just weren't ready mentally for the great changes that came with such increasing utilization of machinery. I believe many of our present day troubles are based on the fact that we are still not fully integrated into our society of today and are still feeling the shocks of trying to adjust that began many years ago. Through science fiction people will start to mature to the greater complexities to come, even before their arrival, a very good thing.

And may I sneer a little at people who insist stf isn't supposed to teach you anything, but is just escape literature? I can't believe that anyone doesn't pick up at least a little technical knowledge from reading stf. And sometimes it leads a person into whole new (to them) fields of research. I know that I know a great deal more of physics than I would have ever bothered to find out about if my interest hadn't been originally aroused by stf. Too, I believe stf gives its readers a broader horizon. If you can contemplate with perfect equanimity a six-legged creature with pseudopods it becomes a bit hard to look down on a person who has by birth the tan that so many of us spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to acquire artificially.

Even your letters were better than usual this issue, and I look forward to the regulars (Marian Bradley, Joe Gibson and the rest) as much as if they were a department of your magazine. Guess they are at that and a darned good and interesting one too.

If I write any more you'll scream and anyway my first year of college starts in a few days and I'm busy. So are you, I suspect, though I can't possibly think what with. (All right, so I ended on a preposition!) Unless you're gloating over an even better issue to come. (I hope, I hope, I hope!) The last was a direct hint . . . if you can't take it I'm setting up the SBBM-MCTH (The Society For Bringing Back Merwin—Mines Can't Take A Hint.)

Thanks again for a wonderful issue. — *P.O. Box 19, Asheville, N. C.*

So first year co-eds from North Carolina are now Szold on science fiction? (Sorry, it just slipped out.) And very philosophic about it too. You might have added in your remarks that this is a major revolution in itself. Ten years ago stf readers were practically all male, today, with or without benefit of fan activities, a lot of girls and housewives and other members of the sex are quietly reading science fiction and beginning to add their voices to the babel in TEV. And a lot of them, tucked away in more or less remote places are beginning to ask, "Where has this stuff been all our lives?" and "Where can we meet other science fiction fans so we can talk shop instead of feeling all alone?"

We confess this came as something of a surprise to us. We honestly never expected such a surge of female women into science fiction. (We're the old-fashioned type, used to gals who wouldn't even try to change a flat tire—shucks, why should they when all they had to do was stand at the side of the road and look appealing and some jerk would stop and change it for them, ruining his freshly tailored suit and white shirt in the process.) Who sounds cynical? Us? You're crazy.

CAMPAIGN TALK
by B. W. Williams

Dear Sham: Having just finished reading your October ish and TEV I got my dander up. So may I say a few words of encouragement, discouragement and other adjectives.

Let me ask ye, lad; is that Mr. Elliot a poor relative of yours? How else did he get his novel in print?

Now the story I rather liked was GRAVESONG by Junior Miller. It had a kind of epic quality. I mean it was like a well-written poem; like an old ballad.

Now with gnashing teeth and rolling eyeballs I attack ETHERGRAMS. First let me sharpen my tusks.

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Okay, ready. Mr. Fultz, go see a brain specialist because PASSPORT TO PAX was the best story on teleports, telekinesis and telepaths to appear in any mag for aeons. Sam was lucky to get his paws in it. (In it? On it?) (Under it—Ed.)

Semenovitch—what a character! Say fellow, why don't you take a writing course?

What's wrong with sex inside or outside as long as the gal shows expression in her eyes? Let's don't make it lewd though. Keep it ascetic and I will keep on reading it.

Fie on you, Marie-Louise. You must be egotistic. Bet you are just that purty. After all, aren't all beautiful gals got an ego a mile long?

I hope you print this, if only because I have a bone to pick with "The Gnarly Man" (meaning Seibel.) By all that's holy he should be taken out by loyal fen and rode out of town on a rail. He's a disgrace to fandom. Sometimes I wonder if he's all there.

I am the candidate for President of the RSO-TOAR Club. Some fen write me and I tell 'em what it means. — *Faufax, Okla.*

We'd like to make with the snappy answers to this missive, but we are helpless, having been broken up by one line above, to wit: "What's wrong with sex inside or outside as long as the gal shows expression in her eyes?" If this doesn't go down as a classic in the annals of stf, we will make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Reminds me of the story of a fellow who was arguing with a friend about a girl and said, "Remember that beauty is only skin deep." And the other fellow said, "I know, but I'm only interested in the outside!"

And B. W.—I'm afraid you can't run Seibel out of town—he's out—way out. He's joined the Navy.

ULTERIOR MOTIVE

by Bill Walker

Dear Sam: Generally, I am not one to go hog wild about any one story Sam, but for the first time in my brilliant career, I am going to go way out on a limb and say that ASYLUM EARTH is undoubtedly the finest story I have ever read in SS.

Just who is this Bruce Elliot kick? Perhaps I have been prowling the hallowed corriders of *Astounding* a bit too long. By all means, let's have more by Mr. Elliot soon. If your lead novels continue to approach the level of ASYLUM EARTH, I sadly fear (?) you are about to obtain another subscriber.

In passing, I shall also give a pat on the back to De Camp's THE GUIDED MAN; a slightly lighter pat to DISPOSAL; a slight sneer to NOTICE OF INTENT; and a full sized Snarly Seibel type sneer to GRAVESONG and THROW-BACK. (By the way, the snarling one was conspicuous by his absence in TEV. Wha hoppen? Maybe he ran out of snarling material?)

Assuming that you do publish this, Sam, (Heh heh—ulterior motive coming up) if there are any fen (fem?) currently attending Penn State, I wish they would drop around to the Nittany Dorms and say hello, come school time. There is an alarming scarcity of fans in this area.

Keep up the good work!!! — *305 Main St., Watsontown, Penna.*

You don't know who Bruce Elliott is? He's a poor relative of ours. Ha! Anyway we couldn't resist the temptation to framistan with the juxtaposition of these two letters just to show you what public opinion is. Nothing.

Seibel? Who he?

NOGOODNICKS, INC.

by Willard Platts

Hi! Sam: Bah! I say. (Not Wow, Whoopee or well done, just plain Bah.) What's happened to the readers of Stf? They write sweet letters, they compliment, they pat each other's backs, they glow. Tsk! Tsk! disgusting. What passes for argument now days is so courteous, and so one sided, usually. What happened to the good old days?

I can't see a bad man run down without saying something, so I say—"Hurray for Seibel", he's one of the old school. Come on Sabertooth let's snarl a little, let's be nasty, and complain, and disagree with these pipsqueaks. Who cares if sometimes they happen to be right? That's irrelevant, it doesn't signify. Don't let a little thing like right and wrong stand in the way of a good argument. If they say Yes, we'll say No and prove it. Then too, you have your name to live up to. (Sharpen your teeth on a few more fans and Editors.) Hate to say this, but you've been sounding kind of nice lately, don't want to think Ole Sabertooth is fading away to a pale little pussy cat. Drop all morals and ethics and get in there and slam things around. This column doesn't have nearly enough villains, especially of the genius variety. (I admire geniuses, mad or otherwise.) Hope these hecklers realize if they scare old Snarly out that there won't be much of any one on the opposition to rave against.

I thought Peggy Kaye's letter in July SS the best in a long time, but how can an otherwise intelligent sounding young (?) lady say things, if only by agreeing, against the Snarler? I beg you Peggy, and others, reconsider. It's still not too late to get on the good side. You too can be one of us Nogoodnicks.

And something else Dear Sam, this humor angle, it almost isn't there. 'N I miss Merwin's poems too. I know you've tried poetry a couple of times, and Ghaaa! (Sound effects, I said them and they're heartfelt) but couldn't you try again, but only a few more times? You know, if at first you just don't rhyme, try try another time, then quit before everyone stops buying the mag. We want something distinctive about SS, but not its smell please.

I like your two mags well enough I guess, I subscribe.

Good sense in Jim Harmon's Oct. SS letter, huh? —*Box 13 u.s.n. 230 % P.M. Seattle, Wash.*

They've been feeding the gobs raw meat again. And speaking of geniuses, you know why the opposition has kind of faded out of TEV lately? Can't stand the gaff. All the tigers

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sound like pussycats after they've fired their broadsides and found the old ship still afloat. It breaks their hearts. Then we cut loose with a .22 from the poop deck and the carnage is awful. Take for example your request for more poetry. You still want it or have you had enough?

We propose you for president of the SON (Society of NoGoodnicks.) Any other business?

OBSOLETE EDITORS

by W. W. Llewellyn

Dear Mr. Mines: Well, I read several articles on Krilium and it seems to be quite a wonderful advancement for chemistry and the farmer—that is, on a small scale. According to the articles I have read—SCIENCE, April 11, 1952; HARPER'S, September, 1952, etc.—each acre of land to be *conditioned* (since Krilium is *not* a fertilizer) will take between 200 and 2000 pounds. At $1.39 per pound, how many farmers do you think will be able to afford it? The farmer who has the money probably won't need much while the farmer whose land is eroding won't have the money. Of course, in time the price may be cut considerably, but even if the price should go as low as a penny per pound, which I doubt, how many Asiatic or South American farmers do you think could buy it? Also, Krilium will not help sandy soil, or soil that has had its plant nutrients leeched away, etc.

So at least for the next decade or two (probably longer), I can't see where Krilium will be a "world saver" or anything close to that. I personally don't think that a mechanical or chemical "gadget" will ever take the place of "know-how" or intelligence. So your statement that the "whole problem of soil erosion has been completely altered by Krilium" is, in my opinion, a little far fetched.

I definitely *do not* think the books I mentioned previously are any where near being obsolete, and I think that you had better go back and re-read them. Here are a couple of *new* ones you should read: Elmer Pendell's POPULATION ON THE LOOSE, and Robert Cook's HUMAN FERTILITY, The Modern Dilemma.—*50 S. Second Street, San Jose 13, California.*

Of course the price of Krilium is too high for it to be a world saver at this point in its development, just as the price of rockets is too high for us to inaugurate regular passenger service to the planets. But the point is that the breach has been made in another barrier and the goal is a little closer. The price will come down, of course. Also, even if individual farmers are unable to afford soil conditioners, governments may step in and take over, as was done in planting the shelter belt out west during the first Roosevelt administration. Moreover—and this is the important point—Krilium is undoubtedly only the first of many new materials whose development will be stimulated. The Harper's article mentioned that a whole new chemistry of long-chain polymers has been set off and new materials which may be better and cheaper than the acrylonitriles are likely to be designed. They even mentioned some now in various stages of development: a cellulosic powder called CMC which Hercules Powder is working on; an unnamed material from General Aniline, lignin from wood waste and the ubiquitous silicates.

Of course no one expects any one gimmick, however good, to be a world-saver all by its lonesome. But a new chemistry, coupled with advances in related fields of conservation, husbandry and so on, will change man's approach and his *attitude* toward the soil, which will make all the difference in the world.

Okay, okay. I'll read the books. Stop twisting my arm.

FANDOM'S THRONE

by Will W. Feek, Jr.

Dear Editor: I am thirty-two and although I have been reading and enjoying SF since I was fifteen, this is my first letter to any of you story jugglers. Until recently I had always thought that SF was doled out in a set pattern to us helpless fans, our pleas for variety being politely ignored, but now I realize the fan is the life of the magazine, and that it is the fan who rules the ether insofar as SF is concerned. TEV reeks of criticism, and I notice that this criticism has molded your mags to the desires of these enthusiastic fans.

I want to thank you for ASYLUM EARTH, a story that tickles the imagination as to what humanity is all about. The method in which Bruce Elliott fuses probabilities, implied new sciences, and present human emotions together is indeed startling. Science is good story material, but let's not try to fool ourselves into believing that it is all mechanical or electrical science; let's deal more in the psychological motivations of the simple human mind. In ASYLUM EARTH we find just enough mental and physical romance to make a science fiction story real.

I think a lot of our trouble is the fact that there are too few fans of the feminine sex! Their intuitions would lead our mag to success.—*P.O. Box 784, Asheville, N. C.*

You can stop worrying about the dearth of female fans. They are moving in on stf as they moved in on the men's barber shops not so long ago. Personally we welcome it. We never thought that stf was male property and we think that anything really big must belong to all the people, assuming women are people, a point which has been under hot discussion for some thousands of years and isn't settled yet.

But there's certainly no set pattern doled out to the readers; science fiction changes from month to month and we're right in back, pushing.

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THE INSIDE DOPE

by Tom Condit

Greetings, Oh, Alledged—alleg—Greetings, Oh, Loyal Servant of Ghu: This humble one would dare to address your excellency. . .

On page 129 of the October issue of your holy publication, there appeared a letter from one Kiwi Baidowsky, in which he stated that Xeno was "a Martian brew made out of the unsavory juice of the kiwi plant" and in your hallowed comments upon this missive, you, in your almighty Editorship, stated: "We've got Saturn, Frog Eyes, and Wart Ears locked in the basement with 492 jugs of Zeno." (Zeno, yet, for that alone you should be condemned to the Vaults of GDejgjr, beldt!)

In the first place, Xeno is not brewed from "the unsavory juice of the kiwi plant," nor is it Martian. Xeno was invented by the great Titan explorer Mavg Tor Rrmg (see, Umftt H Tor, by ZFH Td Dbf) and is made by mixing the powdered remains the organism *anarobus ganymedus* with the juice of a Titan "plant" (short of a 48-page scientific treatise this is the best explanation of its nature available in terrestial terms) called DHVMF, Xeno is one of the few things which aren't poisonous to either Terrans or Titans, and was thus very popular.

In the second place, you may have Frog Eyes and Wart Ears in the subterranean sector of your holy building, but Ye Sarge is at present floating in suspended animation in a glass coffin somewhere in space between the orbits of Mercury and Pluto (due to the fact that in case of war Ye Sarge will be revived for use as a secret weapon, Military Security rule D6366 forbids disclosure of exact position . . . if you don't believe me, ask Merwin, he's the one that put 'im there.

This one agrees with Capella and Warner, would agree more if they came from civilized sectors of this planet.

Also agree with Stevens on illo-credits. There's a typo in his letter, says D-d where it should say damned (no caps).

Holding has something—dunno what.

Luke Nudnick is *not* a reliable historian, that *fwerk* wouldn't know a BeM from a Grulzak.

Calkin's comments on the waistlines of heroes are uncalled for . . . remember Harriman, Giles Habibula, etc., not to mention Tor.

For the information of certain Goon-level intelligences, the disfiguring of the Ubangi women was for none of the reasons advanced (I agree with you on beauty being only relative, smiles), tho Belsinger came nearest. The distortion was to discourage not adulterers, but *slave traders*.

Jim Harmon can go . . . damned Republican.

Dot vreply du Marie-Louise vas lochick?

There's an easier solution for Huddleston than getting a new girl . . . murder the aunt.

A person like thet, it'd be more like lynchin'. Insurance, too.

You said there was a "Tightening up that follows war fever" . . . what about the '20's? (I can answer that, too, but I'm not gonna.)

Clarkson's statement that the lack of air on the moon is unfair to birds, bugs and bees brings to mind the question—"Are we, in having an atmosphere, being unfair to anaerobic organisms?"

Mrs. Shaver's estimation of S. Seibel, APTNA, was magnificent.

I agree with Jim Leake on all but the last part of his letter . . . the Inca didn't show much brains either.

Link better ship that .30-30 to someone nearer Seibel. Of course I could always teleport a bullet into his br-no, that wouldn't do any good, he hasn't got one, better try his heart.

The style of this letter isn't particularly consistent, but that's life.—*General Delivery, Redding, Calif.*

This boy's got information even we never heard of. Gadzooks, we went down to the basement post-haste to check and sure enough, Saturn was gone. We heard a rumor he was writing comic strips, but haven't been able to get any competent authority to offer an opinion as to whether he would be used for a secret weapon in the case of a military emergency.

Luke Nudnick is absolutely reliable as a historian. In the classic disagreement with Professor Schlemiel over the age of some Martian orange skins discovered on the banks of a canal, Nudnick proved conclusively that they were discarded by Martian picnickers during the dry summer of '87 as against Schlemiel's claim that this spot had been an extinct colony of refuges from California. Dr. Wladyslaw Timpoff backs Nudnick completely.

Well, we gotta go. Some letters are left, as always. James Lewis: you sent in $6.00 for subscriptions to TWS and SS. If you aren't getting the mags, we think we know why. No address anywhere on your letter, check or envelope. You got an address? Send it in, we're holding the check. And oh, yes, Manning Draco may appear in book form soon, will let you know when I know more about it.

Marty Graetz—nice letter, but I just couldn't see starting that "what is fantasy" guck again. Mind? And Mona Lee Rhines, Rt. 1, Alger, Michigan, wants to know if there are any fan clubs in Michigan, plugs for more men on the covers and wants to know if Jerry Bixby and Sam Mines aren't the same things. Things?

—*The Editor*

As this issue goes to press, we have been shocked by word that Earle K. Bergey is dead. He died quite suddenly, amidst unfinished work and plans for new work.

More than any other science-fiction artist, Earle grew up with STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES. He was lurid when the magazines were lurid; he was the sensitive craftsman when the occasion demanded it. His best work was still ahead of him—which is always the tragedy of an artist's death. We shall miss him.

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REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

ITEM: the New York chapter of the Little Monsters of America has "reformed"—which I take to mean that it has split off from the parent body to form a rump group. New members are wanted. Chief rump—excuse me, I mean the guy to contact—is Charles Catania, 620 West 182nd Street, New York 33, New York.

Also have received a communique from "The Junior Flying Saucer League of Investigations," the bulk of which is reproduced below to give you the pitch . . . high and outside:

We have just formed a club: the Junior 'Flying Saucer' League of Investigations. Two of our L. A. newspapers have done an article about this league . . . We would like to get members all over the U. S.

Our club has a library on the 'saucers' in which we have all the mags that have 'saucer' stories in them, and we have as many reports and clippings as we can get.

We are now working actively on the theory of the propulsion of 'flying saucers,' trying to get immediate sightings of them so we can triangulate the same, and we are very much trying to get pix of them.

To become a member we request 25c for the cost of mailing information on 'saucers' to members (which anyone can do after he or she becomes a member), gathering info on the 'things,' and, as the name implies, investigating 'flying saucers.'

Also to become a member you must answer *yes* to these questions: Do you believe that 'flying saucers' are real, and do you want them to be exposed and the truth about them to be made public. After the person becomes a member we have a questionnaire for them to fill out. (Do you have binoculars? Etc.)

. . . By-the-way I forgot to mention that this club is for teenagers. If anyone would like to join they can write to me at the address below.

Sincerely,
MAX B. MILLER, President
1420 S. Ridgely Drive
Los Angeles 19, Calif.

My answer is *yes* . . . but I haven't any binoculars. What do I do now?

Also: Jimmy Taurasi wants it known that the next Fan-Vet Con will be held same place/same date as the last one. Details will follow when I receive 'em.

Now, speaking of Taurasi:

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-03 32nd Avenue, Flushing 54, New York. Editor: James V. Taurasi. 10c per copy; published bi-weekly.

F-T has gone back to its old mimeographed format . . . guess the slicked-up job was too much of a bite. Anyway, F-T is still tops in newszines. Subscribe, if you want timely stf news in your mailbox twice a month.

ALIEN, 212 West Avenue, Cartersville, Georgia. Editor: Vic Waldrop, Jr.

Varied and readable . . . no price or pub schedule listed, but looks like a comer.

KALEIDOSCOPE, Box 1199, Grand Central Station, New York 17, New York. Editor: Lee D. Quinn.

Gags, mostly . . . a "scientifictional Chaucerian Ballad," a story, some assorted remarks and a poem:

A squirrel looked at a fan-ed,
Then his mother's eyes did meet.
"Yes, darling," said the mama squirrel,
"But he's not the kind we eat."

Dave Ashton Hammond

Lee wants material . . . cynicism, mad satire, poems, cartoons, stories . . . oh, just any damned thing.

MINISCULE, 220 Shoreward Drive, Great Neck, New York. A product of Algis J. Budrys, a new if variable star in the ranks of stf pro-dom.

Golly gee . . . I just don't know what to say—that's printable. My good friend Ajay entered my office, blushing prettily, kissed me on several cheeks and said, "Here . . . for *you*."

MINISCULE is about 4" by 5", and contains eight pages, neatly typed. My copy—a "special presentation/review copy"—is bound in genuine aluminum foil, and is first off the press (Royal, that is). Subsequent copies—of which there are three or four—are simply carbons of the first, bound in plain ordinary old bond, so there.

I'm touched. For about fifty bucks so far. And at the bottom of p. 5 is a passage which cooks Budrys' lousy little goose . . . if he thinks he can get a nice word from me after calling me a "skinny,

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aging, bushy ex boy-nepot," he's got a couple of sizable thinks coming.

A psychiatrist looked at a Budrys,
Then his inner eye did meet.
"Yes," said his Id to his Ego,
"But he's too far gone to treat."

SF, 9612 Second Avenue, Silver Spring, Maryland. Editor: John L. Magnus. 15c per copy; published monthly.

I found this one in my pocket after returning home from the convention . . . with very little recollection of how it got there; with only a hazy picture of a hand snaking toward me from the shadows in Terrace Casino, and a voice declaring, *"Here!"*

Anyway, it's a neat little job . . . nicely laid out, balanced, more than usually readable. Am puzzled that Magnus, in his remarks concerning prozines, is apparently unaware that other than digest-sized books exist . . . so a third-order whammy on *him*, but keep your eye on his fanzine.

FANTASY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM, 54 Ellesmere Avenue, St. Vital, Manitoba, Canada. $1.00 per copy.

. . . and worth twice the price.

Says Chester D. Cuthbert, President of the CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION, who sent it to me:

"Enclosed is Copy No. 40 of FANTASY CLASSIFACTION SYSTEM by Alastair Cameron . . . it represents the first detailed attempt to analyze and classify the basic ideas upon which the entire field of fantasy and science fiction is built. Incidentally, it is an inexhaustible source of plot ideas and combinations, and therefore a reliable handbook for authors."

Which just about covers its nature . . . I'll add only that it's a terrific piece of work. In 52 neatly organized pages Alastair Cameron has boiled science fiction down to categories within categories within categories, like the Chinese ivory balls, and classified the whole shemozzle by a modified decimal system far easier to follow than would seem at first glance. Practically every basic science fiction theme, subject, motif, concept, theory is represented, here formulated, correlated, sub-divided and organized in readable form for the first time to my knowledge, and aren't I verbose?

Strongly recommended. Should be on every fan's bookshelf . . . and every stf writer's. Obtainable from Cuthbert at the above-given address.

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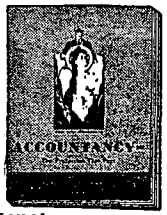

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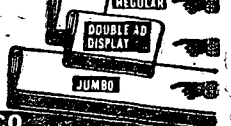

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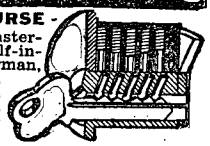

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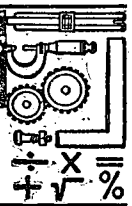

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SCIENCE-FICTION ADVERTISER, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. Editor: Roy A. Squires. 20c per copy; published bi-monthly.

Top-rate, as usual . . . I could write this review in my sleep.

A Dollens cover, nifty reproduction, lots of book-and-mag advs., the concluding installment of Arthur J. Cox's excellent DEUS EX MACHINA: A Study of A. E. van Vogt.

And a subscription-getting contest that seems to be falling flat on its merits . . . hear me, chillun, the first-place prize is quite an item if you lean toward collecting: a copy of Wm. Timlin's rare and beautiful THE SHIP THAT SAILED TO MARS, which prices in the vicinity of $500.00.

All you have to do to win it is to scrounge up more subscriptions to SFA than anyone else. Editor Squires, viewing the small response to the contest, surmises that the average fan is discouraged from the attempt by visions of thousands upon thousands of subscriptions being produced by the winner. Not so, says Squires: the amount will probably be nearer *twenty*.

Can't you top that?

In next month's STARTLING STORIES you will find no full-length feature novel—only a few short stories and perhaps a novelet. The entire front portion of the book will instead be devoted to fanzine reviews . . . eighty pages of fanz—

What, Sam?

But, Sam—lookit this pile of *fanzines!* I gotta do something—

Oh . . . we already—bought—a *novel*?

Hell.

In next month's STARTLING STORIES you will find an exceedingly lengthy fanzine column indeed, comprising exceedingly terse reviews *indeed*. So if you've been wondering why no mention . . . see you then.

—JEROME BIXBY

P. S. Shel Deretchin dropped in—right through the roof—to tell me that the New York Little Monsters have changed their name to . . . to . . . h'm, where's the note I took of it?

Lost, that's where.

Anyway, they're holding a "FenVention" in March '53 . . . and if you call Catania for particulars and get no answer, there is a blood-chilling alternative: call Deretchin, 1234 Utica Avenue, Brooklyn 3, New York—IN 2-8632.

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Science Fiction

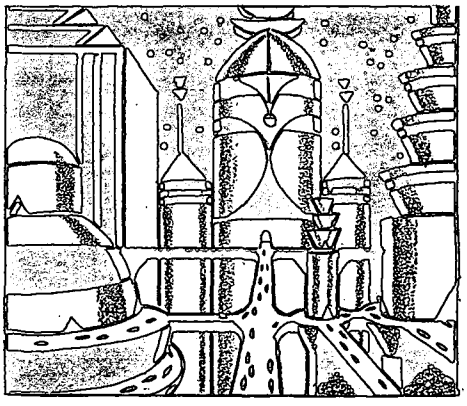
BOOKSHELF

Reviews of New Books

THE HEADS OF CERBERUS by Francis Stevens, Polaris Press, Reading, Pa. Limited edition, boxed. 190 pages, $3.00.

A COLLECTOR'S item, this handsomely designed and boxed volume is limited to 1490 copies for sale. It represents one of the earliest ambitious fantasies, employing the parallel time track plot which was so enthusiastically adopted later on by so many writers.

THE HEADS OF CERBERUS first appeared in 1919. During a six year period, Fran-



cis Stevens wrote CITADEL OF FEAR, CLAIMED, SERAPION, THE LABYRINTH and AVALON—all novels in addition to THE HEADS OF CERBERUS, plus three short stories. The style of CITADEL OF FEAR made many people believe that Francis Stevens was a pseudonym for A. Merritt, and the writer's identity was the subject of much speculation.

Francis Stevens' real name was Gertrude Bennett. She lived in Philadelphia and turned to writing after the death of her husband, drowned while hunting buried treasure. Unable to hold a regular job because of an invalid mother and a young child, she turned to writing. In 1923, with the death of her mother and her child's growing independence, she gave up writing and returned to secretarial work. She

[*Turn page*]

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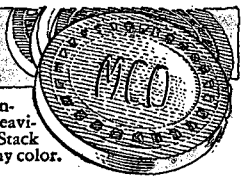

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moved to California, her daughter married and they saw little of each other. In 1939 a letter from daughter to mother was returned. Gertrude Bennett had simply disappeared and no trace of her was ever found.

Her mark remains in the singularly interesting volumes of fantasy she left behind.

ARE YOUR TROUBLES PSYCHOSOMATIC? by J. A. Winter, M.D., Julian Messner, Inc., New York, 222 pages, $3.50.

THERE was a momentary temptation to get an expert to review this book, but we quickly abandoned the idea. Books like this may be written to impress the experts, but they are written to help the layman. An expert can only assess its medical validity; assuming that, any evaluation of its importance is more the business of the layman than the expert. If the book is helpful to the reader it is successful; if not, it fails. What the experts think about it may have little practical effect.

This book is apt to be helpful, if only for one reason. Dr. Winter has the engaging ability of making a difficult subject seem deceptively easy. He avoids psychological detours, he avoids obfuscation, he makes things blissfully clear. Moreover, he understands the most important of all writing gimmicks—he relates what he has to say to You, the reader.

The theme of the book is one you have heard before now. Many of our bodily ills are caused by our own attitudes. We want to get sick because it relieves us of responsibility in many situations; we fight with our wives and yell at our children because we have set up a response pattern which is difficult to change. We may have serious mental disturbances simply because it is easier to follow a certain path than not, despite the eventual permanent damage. The whole purpose and tenor and tone of the book is designed to lead you subtly along until your steps have brought you before a mirror wherein you may see yourself a little more clearly than before.

Personally we found the first part of the book more helpful than the latter. The analyses of typical cases, the discussion of why some common emotional difficulties arise—these were direct, clear and universal. In the latter part, where a limited amount of self-therapy is suggested, things become considerably more vague. This may be quite intentional, all doctors having an understandable prejudice against patients treating themselves. The dangers of unskilled labor and all that. But in a way it does lessen the impact of a book which seems to slow

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up after moving with constant acceleration. If there is another to follow we'd like to see it.

SANDS OF MARS by Arthur C. Clarke, Gnome Press, Inc., New York, 216 pages, $2.75.

THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE by Arthur C. Clarke, Harper & Brothers, New York, 199 pages, $3.50.

THE elevation of Arthur Clarke to the status of an international author of serious merit comes as no surprise to science fiction fans who are, these days, growing slightly hoarse from saying we told you so. With science fiction above all else a literature of ideas par excellence, it was only a question of time as to when someone would take those ideas out of the realm of fiction and clothe them respectably enough for world notice. The selection of THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE by the Book of the Month Club marks a huge advance in the acceptance of such ideas by the reading public. It does the cause—if you'll excuse the expression—of science fiction, incalculable good. And what it does for Mr. Clarke's bankroll should happen to all science fiction writers.

SANDS OF MARS is a novel which is actually a documentary rather than a romance, though others may quarrel with my use of the term documentary as applied to something which hasn't yet happened. The idea however, is that the author has written a story which tells simply of the organization of a flight to Mars and the establishment of an earth colony there. Instead of indulging in fancy, however, Clarke

[*Turn page*]

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has screened his material with the utmost care so as to include only those ideas and events which are based on sound, possible science. He tries to give the reader, as accurately as possible, what it must feel like to leave the earth, to undergo the strange conditions and stresses of life in space, and to visualize the incredible feeling of setting foot on a strange planet. In those respects this is a documentary.

Readers who want blood and thunder will therefore be disappointed in this as a novel. Those who are looking for sugar-coated information should enjoy it.

THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE gives no fiction sop to the reader. It is simple enough and doesn't attempt to dazzle the layman with heavy technical matters or mathematics. It simply discusses in straightforward fashion the problems of space and space travel, the astronomical facts of life and the things man must do if he is to make the plunge. It is lavishly illustrated with photographs and paintings and it is a terrific book. It also happens to cost $3.50, but if you can scrape it up it's a good deal, especially if you have a lot of misconceptions about the universe as most of us do, such as the matter of keeping a spaceship at livable temperatures during flight. It's a book to keep—at least until our gyrating nuclear knowledge makes it as obsolete as Christopher Columbus' navigation.

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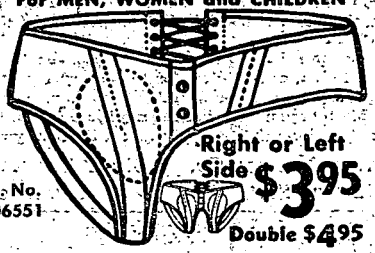

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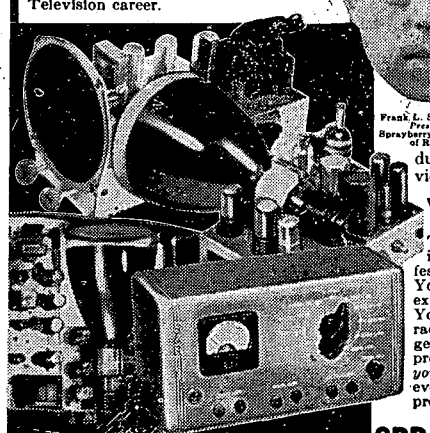

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